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# Contingent constellations: Frederick Douglass and the fact freedom

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CONTINGENT CONSTELLATIONS:  
FREDERICK DOUGLASS AND THE FACT OF FREEDOM

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
Agricultural and Mechanical College  
in partial fulfillment of the  
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by

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## ABSTRACT

Reading the celebrated *Narrative* (1845) of Frederick Douglass (1817-95) as well as his second autobiography *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855) alongside the theories of freedom including Immanuel Kant's and G. W. F. Hegel's among others, this dissertation examines the process through which the young American slave Douglass discovers the idea of freedom and turns it into the primary object of his pursuit to the point that he stakes his life in his famed battle with the overseer Edward Covey. The experience of hearing other slaves' voices—such as Aunt Hester's cries and slave songs—opens his eyes to the darkest reality of Southern slavery, constructing in Douglass's mind a material core that drives him to find some explanation for it, which he gradually comprehends by his continuous efforts to carefully overhear what slaveholders are saying and to learn to read. The fanstasmatic manifestation of Douglass's irrepressible aspiration for freedom in the form of a "flash" in his consciousness after he is utterly subjected to Covey and his subsequent apostrophe to the sloops on the Chesapeake Bay are in significant ways comparable to Kant's conceptualization of the moral law of freedom in terms of the starry heavens and the voice of reason as well as the Kantian aesthetics of the sublime. Unlike Kant, who delimits the act of freedom solely within the mind's transformation of its own disposition, Douglass

stresses in his account of the fight with Covey that such an existential transformation is completed by an action in the real world. Douglass's description of his victory over the overseer shares with the Hegelian dialectic, especially the acclaimed dialectic of master and slave, several crucial threads including an emphasis on irreducible material elements involved in the reversal, elements which he closely relates to the "fact" of his freedom. At the same time, Douglass diverges from the Hegelian theory of freedom on important points such as the primacy of the state over individual liberty among others.

## INTRODUCTION

### FREEDOM PHILOSOPHICAL AND POLITICAL

Concluding the famed climactic sequence that recounts his head-on confrontation with the “slave breaker” Covey in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845), the ex-slave narrator proudly declares “I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact” (65). This assertion is remarkable considering that Douglass *in fact* had to suffer under Southern chattel slavery until one of his attempts at escape at last brought about a hoped-for outcome more than four years later. Even when he substantially enlarged and revised the *Narrative* in his 1855 second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass retained the elementary structure of the phrase, saying “[t]his spirit [of being not afraid to die] made me a freeman in *fact*, while I remained a slave in *form*” (286).<sup>1</sup> In a volume whose generic code either tacitly or openly demands its author rigorously adhere to facts—the unnamed editor of *My Bondage* painstakingly reminds its readers in the preface that the book they are about to read is not “a work of Art,” but “a work of Facts—Facts, terrible and almost incredible, it may be—yet Facts, nevertheless”—Douglass makes a rhetorical inversion through which the ‘fact’ of freedom is dislocated from the plane of objectivity where verifiable facts such as legally being a slave count most to the level of subjective experience at which he underwent a “glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom” as a result of the fight (105, 65).

This rhetorical somersault can be seen as a covert maneuver Douglass had to make within the strict constraints imposed upon Afro-American authorship. As William

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<sup>1</sup> The phrase remains virtually unchanged in Douglass’s third autobiography, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881; enlarged 1892) (591).



Andrews points out in his magisterial study of slave narratives, *To Tell A Free Story*, black autobiographers were forced to “invent devices and strategies that would endow their stories with the appearance of authenticity,” and the reception of a slave narrator’s story as truth “depended on the degree to which his artfulness could hide his art” (2-3).<sup>2</sup> Douglass’s rhetoric of factuality at once evidences and camouflages his art of appropriating the bridle laid upon him as an enabling condition for expression. In a regime that refuses to recognize any merit beyond faithful reproduction of reality in the mind of a slave, Douglass rhetorically devises a means for his personal desire for liberty to express itself by transfiguring it into a ‘fact’ that plays a role equally or even more weighty than objective facts of slavery in his life.

It is worth noting here that Douglass’s remark is to be considered as engaging in the practice common among American slaves of invoking the discourse of freedom that informed the Founding of the United States to legitimize their seeking liberty against all the wishes of the nation’s slaveholding society. As his famous oration “What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?” (1852) most eloquently demonstrates, Douglass is unsurpassed in his masterful deployment of this strategy. The speech is a wake-up call the ex-slave orator rings to the American nation that indulges in sweet moral slumber and fails to live up to “the great principles of political freedom and of natural justice, embodied in that Declaration of Independence” (115). Relentlessly exposing how it is “inhuman mockery and sacrilegious irony” that the nation founded upon the principle of liberty tolerates slavery, Douglass hurls scorching balls of irony to the audience (116). His words are “a fiery stream of biting ridicule, blasting reproach, withering sarcasm, and stern rebuke,”

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<sup>2</sup> For a detailed study of the issue of ‘white’ authenticating devices in slave narratives including Douglass’s *Narrative*, see Stepto, especially 3-31. See also Sekora.

calculated to strike a chord in the nation's conscience with its catastrophic force comparable to a "storm," a "whirlwind," or an "earthquake" (118). Thus Douglass turns the American legacy of the discourse of freedom into a weapon of his own to shake the nation. It is no wonder, then, that when he describes in the *Narrative* how he and other slaves made up their minds to carry out their escape plan, Douglass compares the plotters to a legendary hero of the American Revolutionary War: "[i]n coming to a fixed determination to run away, we did more than Patrick Henry, when he resolved upon liberty or death" (74). In *My Bondage*, Douglass reinforces the affiliated lineage descending from the American Revolutionaries to the fugitive slaves with a direct quote from Henry's speech, "Give me Liberty or give me Death" (312).

What I discussed above illuminates the extent to which Douglass, like many other slave narrators, relies on the powerful rhetorical convention of American freedom in order to make his stories more appealing to the audience.<sup>3</sup> It should be pointed out, however, that while it reveals a shared major strand of Afro-American rhetorical strategy in their plead for liberty, it does not fully explain the singularity of Douglass's rhetorical gesture in the remark that the victory over his arch-enemy liberated him from slavery *in fact*. Here I have to make clear a main point of my study: Douglass's claim about the fact of his freedom must be taken seriously. Rather than merely being a figure of speech designed to enhance dramatic effects or a disguised expression of a personal desire for liberty, I would argue, the factuality that Douglass has attached to his experience of freedom must be accepted at its face value. In order to appreciate the true significance of Douglass's declaration that he was no longer a slave in fact, we cannot avoid grappling

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<sup>3</sup> For other slave narrators' similar use of the American rhetoric of freedom, see Bruce 41.

with the elusive question of what is freedom, and this task cannot be carried out without consulting the discursive tradition for which freedom has always been a central issue, namely, philosophy.

Douglass's *Narrative* has seldom been read as a philosophical text,<sup>4</sup> even though its extraordinary depth and sophistication have frequently been acknowledged. This is not surprising given his lack of formal education, which justifies a critical approach that assumes, as is usually the case with fugitive slaves, he was far removed from the influences of contemporary philosophical discourse. Douglass was, to be sure, no Transcendentalist, not raised, like Emerson and Thoreau, in a highly cultivated atmosphere that would readily presents many avenues to the Western philosophical tradition.<sup>5</sup> In contrast to those Harvard graduates, Douglass has crafted his narrative language with the aid of his limited knowledge of only a few books such as an oratory textbook titled *The Columbian Orator* and the Bible. The apparent simplicity of his language tends to make philosophical implications of the *Narrative* unrecognizable. Moreover, the overarching political agenda of the slave narrative as a genre—to effect a

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<sup>4</sup> Except in terms of Hegel's master-slave dialectic, which I will discuss in detail later.

<sup>5</sup> Douglass came into a position where he could easily learn about the recent trend of German philosophy when he was acquainted with Ottilie Assing in 1856. Born in Hamburg in 1819 as the eldest daughter of a Jewish-turned-Lutheran couple whose notable relatives included the Jewish writer and salonist Rahel Varnhagen (1771-1833) (on whom Hannah Arendt wrote a biography), Assing emigrated to the U.S. in 1852. Her reading *My Bondage* brought her to see the well-known orator in Rochester, and the meeting began their friendship which would last for the next 26 years. In 1860, Assing published her German translation of *My Bondage* under the title *Sklaverei und Freiheit: Autobiographie von Frederick Douglass* in Hamburg. According to Douglass biographer William McFeely, Douglass and Assing, "seemingly so different, had a great deal in common" (184). This, and other circumstances—for example, her suicide shortly after she read in a newspaper about Douglass's marriage to Helen Pitts, his white former secretary—seem to confirm the conjecture that their relationship was more than a friendship. Yet, all these events took place after the publication of Douglass's first two autobiographies, on which my argument mainly focuses.

social change significant enough for everyone to see definitely—is, however laudable in itself, prone to obscure the question of freedom and necessity which faces Douglass as he struggles to tell his story of resistance and liberation within the conventional narrative framework that demands the narrator objectively yet vividly depict the wretched spectacle of Southern slavery and how he fled from that hell to the North, but wherein he is not expected to reveal himself as an individual with his own desires. What is striking about Douglass's *Narrative* is the way in which he does address the philosophical issue of freedom as fundamental to and continuous with social liberty while he distinguishes the two levels of freedom as its 'fact' and 'form.'

A look at what a 'liberal' has to say about freedom will make the above mentioned point clearer. John Stuart Mill (1806-73), the representative liberal of Douglass's day, begins his seminal treatise *On Liberty* (1859) with the following demarcation of the social dimensions of liberty, as distinguished from an individual's freedom of willing, as the proper realm of inquiry: "The subject of this essay is not the so-called liberty of the will, so unfortunately opposed to the misnamed doctrine of philosophical necessity; but civil, or social liberty: the nature and limits of the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual" (63). Mill's view illustrates the dominant attitude of modern liberalism towards freedom which typically gives priority to the pragmatic defense of civil liberties over what it regards as empty metaphysical disputes concerning free will.<sup>6</sup> Millian liberalism strictly severs social liberty from philosophical freedom in

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<sup>6</sup> Mill's stance was already anticipated by John Locke, who was a main source of modern liberalism, more than a century and a half before. In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), Locke defines liberty as "the power a Man has to do or forebear doing any particular action . . . according as he himself wills it," and argues that the proper question to ask is, therefore, not "whether the Will be free, but whether a Man be

favor of the former. Douglass, on the other hand, likewise differentiates two modalities of his freedom (one the existential revolution as a result of his fight against Covey, and the other his future attainment of the socially recognized status of a free citizen), but unlike Mill, he prizes his singular experience of being free that *cannot* be readily generalized into a civil right as the irreducible fact of freedom, while taking his still denied entitlement to civil liberty as a ‘formal’ matter that is secondary in importance compared with this primary fact.<sup>7</sup>

From the present-day point of view, which tends to take the inviolable value of civil rights for granted, Douglass’s assertion might seem an exaggeration. As I have already argued, however, this is not the case—he is quite earnest, especially as regards the centrality of subjective freedom to all the social spectrum of liberty. Significantly in this respect, a further examination of *On Liberty* reveals that even Mill is not so consistent in his isolation of civil liberty from philosophical freedom as his initial remark suggests. Underlying Mill’s practical approach to freedom is his embrace of Utilitarian methodology which he has inherited from his father James Mill (1773-1836) and James’s mentor Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832). “I forego,” says Mill, “any advantage which could be derived to my argument from the idea of abstract right as a thing independent of utility. I regard utility as the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions” (71). Thus the possibility of separating real ramifications of liberty in society from the metaphysical idea of freedom

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free”—ultimately, maintains Locke, liberty does not belong to the will but to a man (243-44).

<sup>7</sup> As we shall see, Douglass’s “glorious resurrection” involves both subjective and objective dimensions inseparably, since after this event he was “never again what might be called fairly whipped” (65). It was accompanied by a decisive alteration of objective reality. Precisely the coexistence of these two dimensions in this single event makes it a “fact.” In this sense it brings with it a social freedom, and yet this freedom is obviously not the same thing as what Mill means by “civil liberty.”

depends on the first principle of utility. Yet, instead of defining exactly what utility is, Mill goes on to observe “but it must be utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being” (71). As Isaiah Berlin has pointed out in his essay on Mill, the author of *On Liberty* displays an ineradicable tendency to escape into what Bentham called “vague generalities”—one is left wondering how the notion of utility, “drained of its old, materialistic but intelligible, content, is to be applied” (226). At this point, Mill deviates from the well-trodden Utilitarian path and rather exhibits what Berlin describes as a “spontaneous and uncalculating idealism . . . wholly alien to the dispassionate and penetrating irony of Bentham, or the vain and stubborn rationalism of James Mill” (227).

It is important to note in this connection that the notion of “man as a progressive being” that Mill espouses is the distinctive hallmark of Romanticism. Mill finds the Utilitarian understanding of human nature too simplistic and too impoverished to deal squarely with an unending variety of motives and desires behind human conduct. “Human nature,” Mill observes with biting irony, “is not a machine to be built after a model,” since “[h]uman beings are not like sheep; and even sheep are not indistinguishably alike” (114, 122). Instead of seeking a single model into which all human beings are to be fitted as the preceding generation of Utilitarians did, Mill strives to put forward a theory of social liberty that takes into account the plurality of “desires and impulses [which] are as much a part of a perfect human being as beliefs and restraints” (115). On this point, the influence of the German Romantic notion of *Bildung* is decisive. Although Mill imbibed German Romanticism indirectly through his reading of such English authors as Coleridge and Carlyle and directly from Goethe (Mill,

*Autobiography* 169), the most direct source of inspiration is Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), from whose *The Sphere and Duties of Government*<sup>8</sup> Mill does not only draw the opening epigraph but also repeatedly refers to it throughout the text. At one point, Mill approvingly quotes Humboldt's remark, "the end of man . . . is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole" (112-13). *Bildung* means both *education* and *culture*, and it implies a process of self-development or self-realization in which an individual critically examines, cultivates, and improves his own wants and desires. Romanticism provides Mill with an insight into the value of individuality which he finds deplorably missing in Utilitarianism. As a result, in *On Liberty* Mill is engaged in the task of fusing, or at least reconciling, Utilitarianism and Romanticism.

The latent tension between Utilitarianism and Romanticism in Mill's thinking is worth bearing in mind since it feeds into competing drifts of Mill's—and more broadly, the liberal—conception of liberty. Throughout *On Liberty*, Mill basically adheres to the view that "[t]he only freedom that deserves the name is that of pursuing our own good in our own way, so long as we do not attempt to deprive others of theirs or impede their efforts to obtain it" (73). Our liberty must not be restrained except for the purpose of preventing harm to others that will result from our exercise of freedom. Liberalism in general espouses the twofold principle proposed here of liberty as warding off interference and of on what condition such liberty is to be restricted—the latter being

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<sup>8</sup> Humboldt's *Ideen zu einem Versuch, die Gränzen der Wirksamkeit des Staats zu bestimmen* was written in 1791-92 but not published until 1851. Its first English translation, by Joseph Coulthard, appeared in 1854 under the title *The Sphere and Duties of Government*. A recent English translation of the work carries the more literally rendered title *The Limits of State Action*. See Burrow vii.

what political philosophers have often referred to as the “harm principle.” Of the two components, the principle of non-interference in particular represents what Berlin calls a “negative” concept of freedom in his celebrated essay “Two Concepts of Liberty.” Liberty in the negative sense, according to Berlin, consists in “liberty *from*; absence of interference beyond the shifting, but always recognizable, frontier” (174). In other words, to vindicate liberty in this sense simply means defending “the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others” (Berlin 169). In *On Liberty*, however, Mill reaches for more than this purely negative concept of political liberty. The Millian freedom does not only involve the claim for a free area for action but also—this is where the Romantic aspect of Mill’s thinking comes to light—an agenda for self-realization as a support for the claim. To put it in Berlin’s terms (but probably against Berlin’s original intention), Mill’s putatively negative concept of political liberty secretly draws its vital force from the “positive” register of freedom. Liberty in the positive sense is characterized by *liberty to*, as opposed to the negative *liberty from*, and it specifically implies one’s freedom to be one’s own master (Berlin 178).

Thus even what is commonly considered as the boiled down version of Mill’s negative definition of freedom, according to which liberty is the ability to do what one wants—a definition that has been and is still widely accepted by many liberals—carries the shadow of an *unfulfilled* wish to be one’s own master in the form of the ideal of ascetic self-denial. Rather than strive to realize what I wish in a world in which I can see no promising way of effecting it, I would completely renounce my wishes and then I will be free, at least internally. Like Epictetus the Stoic slave philosopher who felt freer than his master as he had liberated himself from his uncontrollable desires, I will be the master



of my own mind simply by extinguishing my wishes. This is the pitfall which Berlin describes as “the retreat to the inner citadel” which typically and most often takes place in a totalitarian regime (181-87). The liberal conception of freedom as the ability to do what one wishes is liable to fall into this trap, since the world does not readily allow one as much freedom as one desires. Seen in this light, it is not surprising that Mill’s sober analysis of political liberty is accompanied by a nervous warning against “collective mediocrity”: “the general tendency,” argues Mill, “of things throughout the world is to render mediocrity the ascendant power among mankind” (120). Mill’s remarks like this one reveal a so-far obscured yet crucial aspect of *On Liberty*; his defense of liberty is a response to what he perceives as the “tyranny of opinion” (121), a call for erecting the citadel of a free private realm, if not a realm of purely psychological freedom, against the totalitarian encroachment of public opinion. To that extent, Mill’s liberalism is anti-democratic. And significantly, it is also self-contradictory, since in spite of its announced focus on social and political liberties, what it upholds is realized on the condition that one withdraws from the public sphere of democratic politics.<sup>9</sup> Here is the liberal credo “the less politics the more freedom” in a prototypical form. At its roots, the liberal notion of political liberty awkwardly rests on the apolitical belief that, as Arendt once put it,

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<sup>9</sup> As Habermas points out in his now classic study of the bourgeois public sphere, the public sphere of society was relatively independent from the political realm in the eighteenth century; it constituted a kind of buffer zone between the private realm of family relations and the political sphere, mediating them but not wholly assimilated into either of them. In the nineteenth century, however, the public sphere of society gradually lost its autonomy, and the gulf between the public and the private widened with no bridge between them. Simultaneously, the disappearance of an independent mediating zone led to a direct interpenetration between the public and the private. Mill’s liberalism can be seen as a reaction to this crisis of the public sphere. See Habermas, especially the chapter titled “The Ambivalent View of the Public Sphere in the Theory of Liberalism (John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville)” (129-40).

“politics is compatible with freedom only because and in so far as it guarantees a possible freedom *from* politics” (61).<sup>10</sup> *On Liberty* illustrated how readily the negative theory of liberty as non-interference turns into the liberal doctrine of freedom from politics.

In order to further unravel the tangled conceptual skein of liberty and politics in the liberal discourse of freedom, it is pertinent to make an observation on Berlin here. It seems that Berlin considers Mill’s inward turn occurs within the latter’s basically *negative* conception of liberty (186; see also Berlin, Introduction 31). This is no wonder, considering that Berlin’s goal is to formulate a working definition of liberty in the *negative* sense. For Berlin, the danger of withdrawal into a closure posed by the Millian concept of freedom indicates the insufficiency of one dominant mode of thinking concerning negative liberty. The liberal edifice of negative liberty will be perfected only if its defects are corrected or eliminated. In my view, however, the same self-negating tendency in Mill’s liberal theory of freedom rather evinces the inadequacy of Berlin’s differentiation of negative from positive liberty. The main motive behind Berlin’s espousal of negative liberty is, simply put, fear of the totalitarian menace. Among the many ruses totalitarianism uses to justify its all too clearly unlawful interference in people’s freedom, the most cunning and fundamental resides in a paternalistic trickery which Berlin calls “monstrous impersonation”: the all-knowing State ‘kindly’ helps an individual realize his *true* self, because he doesn’t yet know or is too dumb to know what he *really* wants (180). The liberty of an individual may be disposed for the purpose of

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<sup>10</sup> My reference to Arendt should not be taken to mean that I’m seconding her reliance on the republican model of freedom as a solution to the modern diremption of freedom and politics. Admirable as the republican tradition may be, it is ultimately unclear how we can reinstitute it in today’s changed historical conditions. Moreover, Arendt restores freedom within the realm of politics only by, just as Mill did, negating whatever relevance the philosophical concept of freedom has to politics.

realizing a higher truth to which he should have willingly sacrificed his body and soul if he had already liberated himself from the sad limitations of the empirical, narrow-sighted self. Even while acknowledging the possibility that this deception can be perpetrated just as easily with the negative notion of freedom, Berlin argues that “the ‘positive’ conception of freedom as self-mastery, with its suggestion of a man divided against himself, has in fact, and as a matter of history, of doctrine and of practice, lent itself more easily to this splitting of personality into two: the transcendent, dominant controller, and the empirical bundle of desires and passions to be disciplined and brought to heel” (181). On this ground Berlin rejects “all political theories of self-realization,” which he groups together as a perilous pack of ideologies that of necessity breed the totalitarian monstrous impersonation, and seeks to isolate liberty in the negative sense as a domain of freedom distinctively unassociated with this pernicious company (180).

It is worth noticing the curious fate the notion of self-realization undergoes in the course of Berlin’s account of the two concepts of liberty. After identifying self-realization as the outside of negative liberty, Berlin points out there are “two major forms which the desire to be self-directed—directed by one’s ‘true’ self—has historically taken”: one is, of course, self-realization; the other, “self-abnegation” (181). This suggests that self-abnegation is the reverse side of self-realization; it is a consequence that I who aspire to realize myself may well choose to embrace when I have failed to fulfill the desire or see no prospect of its fulfillment. Berlin’s discussion that follows of the aforementioned “retreat to the inner citadel” corroborates this interpretation, since what drives an individual to shut himself up in a closure is his determination, as Berlin puts it, “not to desire what is unattainable” (182). Thus the group of philosophers whom Berlin considers

as treading on this mistaken route of self-abnegation not surprisingly includes those putatively ‘positive’ thinkers of freedom, such as Rousseau and Kant,<sup>11</sup> who postulate a higher self transcending the empirical world of causality. Yet curiously, as I have already mentioned, it also encompasses a large portion of liberal advocates of negative liberty, among whom Mill is the most prominent. Berlin maintains Mill’s definition of negative liberty as the ability to do what one wishes “will not do” (186). But this disavowal of liberalism’s central claim leaves little of the foothold that sustains his negative concept of liberty save the “freedom to choose” and the “pluralism of values,” either of which ultimately remains as indefinite a notion as Mill’s invocation of utility in Berlin’s account (217).

The above argument suggests that self-realization may be far more intrinsic to negative liberty than Berlin is willing to admit, which also amounts to saying that Berlin’s distinction between negative and positive freedom is not tenable as the most fundamental conceptual framework for a proper understanding of liberty.<sup>12</sup> At least, it indicates that we cannot accept *simpliciter* the founding operation of liberalism, namely the definition of freedom as the absence of external obstacles—a definition that is gained at the cost of rendering insignificant a number of crucial questions concerning the

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<sup>11</sup> I will discuss Kant’s theory of freedom in detail in Chapter 2.

<sup>12</sup> For an eloquent exposition of this view, see Taylor, “What’s Wrong with Negative Liberty.” In his comment on Taylor’s essay, David Miller admits that “there are strong idealist (or ‘positive’) elements in Mill’s conception of liberty.” At the same time, Miller also maintains that “shifting from a liberal view of freedom as the absence of external constraints to a more complex position that includes ‘positive’ or idealist elements, as Taylor does, does not mean abandoning liberalism as a general political creed” (Introduction 18). But this issue largely depends on what we will gain (or lose) by defending the banner of liberalism in spite of its contradictory gestures of apparent denial and partial acceptance towards idealism, a question which is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

subjective experience of freedom. The liberal mindset does not illuminate what Douglass underwent when he felt he was no longer a slave *in fact*, not because, as liberals would put it, Douglass's claim does not deserve to be taken at face value, but simply because of the insufficiency of their view of liberty, whether political or philosophical.

At the same time, it must be emphasized that the inadequacy of liberal theories of freedom does not mean a simple return to philosophy will suffice. We can see the difficulty of appreciating the significance of Douglass's experience of freedom by looking at another vital aspect it involves, namely its dimension as an act. Berlin's distinction of negative and positive liberty has as its corollary the differentiation of *opportunity* for free action and free action *as such*. "The freedom of which I speak," argues Berlin, "is opportunity for action, rather than action itself. . . . Freedom is the opportunity to act, not the action itself; the possibility of action, not necessarily [its] dynamic realization . . ." (Introduction 35). Thus Taylor rightly points out in his essay "What's Wrong with Negative Liberty" that theories of negative liberty, including Berlin's, basically rely on an "opportunity-concept, where being free is a matter of what we can do, of what it is open to us to do, whether or not we do anything to exercise these options," whereas what Berlin categorized as the positive notion of liberty is an "exercise-concept" (143-44). It is important to note, however, that while Taylor's 'opportunity-concept' can be readily equated with the liberal notion of 'opportunity for action,' his 'exercise-concept' does not fully rescue what Berlin has discarded in the name of 'action,' insofar as it essentially involves the idea that freedom consists in the "exercising of control over one's life" (143). To put it simply, the exercise-concept

designates a state in which one exercises one's freedom or an internal condition for such exercise rather than an act of freedom *per se*.

This brings us back to the issue of self-realization which directly bears on the matter of how one exercises control over one's life. As Taylor shows, whether or not I feel I have realized myself depends on whether or not I have realized the purposes or feelings to which I attributes more significance than others. In other words, the process of self-realization involves my judging certain desires or feelings as more significant than others. This essential phase in the whole process of self-realization—a phase which Taylor calls “import-attributing”—surely plays a role whose importance I cannot overstress in Douglass's life (156). As I will argue later, without his deliberately cultivating the idea of freedom, and consequently assigning the highest significance to it—so significant that he was not afraid to stake his life on it—his “glorious resurrection” could not have happened. Yet, if we read that event solely through the lens of Taylor's argument, which tends to focus on the import-attributing process, Douglass's emphasis on the transformative action appears wholly unaccountable. The problem with an analysis that centers on the process of import-attribution, and more broadly speaking, of self-realization, is that it presupposes a self who is relatively stable even though subject to change through a gradual process of self-cultivation and who will therefore remain essentially the same even after the act of self-realization. Hence within this framework it is impossible to discuss how the act transforms the self. To put it another way, what Douglass means by the transformative event is not exhausted by the Romantic notion of *Bildung*, which implies a self's progressive development—thus inspiring the ideal of self-realization—but not a disjunction of the developing subject. By extension, philosophical

theories of freedom provide little insight on this matter insofar as they reduce, as Mill denounced, the issue of freedom to that of free will and in so doing presuppose a fixed entity that has free will. In this case again, the object of the subject's willing may change, and yet the possibility that the subject itself is disrupted as a result of an action is precluded. In the worst case scenario, this preliminary postulation of an autonomous subject of free will results in the Stoic retreat to the inner citadel that Berlin pointed out: fully conscious of the desire for freedom but unable to realize it in any objective way, the subject escapes into his own mind where he can enjoy the maximum degree of inner freedom regardless of the question of how to carry his desire into action. Thus philosophical considerations of freedom may well invite the same consequence as we saw regarding liberalism, namely a freedom from politics, even though their starting points are diametrically different: one the absence of external obstacles, the other the internal freedom of willing. This ultimate evasion of politics in both liberal theories of social liberty and philosophical theories of free will is symptomatic of their remarkable inability to properly deal with a crucial element of an individual's liberty: the act of freedom remains a theoretical lacuna within either of these two camps.

A reexamination of the premise of Mill's argument may reveal an exit from this impasse. As he puts it at the outset of *On Liberty*, "the so-called liberty of the will [is] so unfortunately opposed to the misnamed doctrine of philosophical necessity" (63). What he has on his mind here is metaphysical debates carried out between two divergent views concerning the causality of the natural world and the human will. One group takes the position that all are ultimately determined by the chain of natural causality. This position, which is nowadays called determinism, therefore allows the human will little if any

elbow room. By contrast, the other group espouses the view that the human will can determine its own course independently of the causal necessity of natural laws and thus is free. In response to these two poles to which all philosophical debates concerning freedom are customarily reduced, Mill proposes a third position that embraces social liberty. But what if philosophy no longer takes for granted the determinism of natural causality which Mill so deeply abhorred but eventually avoided quarreling with?<sup>13</sup> A recent development in philosophy poses a challenge to free will's long-established monopoly on the field of philosophical investigations into freedom. Although I cannot minutely discuss this matter here, below I will show the contour of such a challenge to the extent that it has relevance to my argument.

In the recent book *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, French philosopher Quentin Meillassoux presents the bold thesis that “contingency *alone* is necessary,” by which he means the absolute contingency of all including physical laws—the only absolute law that permanently governs the world is the (no-)law of contingency (80). Meillassoux puts forwards this thesis by way of an answer to what is known as “Hume’s problem.” In *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748), David Hume illustrates his skeptic stance towards the widely held belief in the constancy of natural laws with the following example of a billiard ball:

When I see, for instance, a Billiard-ball moving in a straight line towards another; even suppose motion in the second ball should by accident be suggested to me, as the result of their contact or impulse; may I not conceive, that a hundred different

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<sup>13</sup> Looking back on the time of his mental crisis, Mill explains how he felt an intense fear towards the dismal prospect opened by his father’s scientific determinism: “the doctrine of what is called Philosophical Necessity weighed on my existence like an incubus. I felt as if I was scientifically proved to be the helpless slave of antecedent circumstances; as if my character and that of all others had been formed for us by agencies beyond our control, and was wholly out of our own power” (*Autobiography* 175).



events might as well follow from that cause? May not both these balls remain at absolute rest? May not the first ball return in a straight line, or leap off from the second in any line or direction? All these suppositions are consistent and conceivable. Why then should we give the preference to one, which is no more consistent or conceivable than the rest? All our reasonings *a priori* will never be able to show us any foundation for this preference. (qtd. in Meillassoux 88)

What if, in other words, the apparent stability of physical laws proves insufficient to demonstrate their permanent necessity? According to Meillassoux, however, philosophers including Hume himself have failed to address the radical consequence posed in the above passage. The most influential, yet ultimately misguided solution to Hume's problem is devised by Kant, who famously observes Hume awakened him from his "dogmatic slumber" and started him on a new line of thought (*Prolegomena* 5). In the Preface to the second edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 1787), Kant announces that whereas previously metaphysics developed on the assumption that "all our knowledge must conform to its objects," now his Critical philosophy starts from the reversed premise that "the objects must conform to our knowledge" (18). Here Kant models his philosophical "experiment" on Copernicus's accomplishment in the field of cosmology: "[u]nable to proceed satisfactorily in the explanation of the motions of the heavenly bodies on the supposition that the entire collection of stars turned round the spectator, [Copernicus] tried to see whether he might not have greater success by making the spectator revolve around and leaving the stars at rest" (18). Thus with what is commonly known as his "Critical turn," which involves an experimental "change in point of view," Kant intends to carry out his own 'Copernican revolution' (21).

As Meillassoux perspicuously points out, however, the Kantian revolution is to be more properly compared to a "Ptolemaic counter-revolution," since what Kant asserts is "not that the observer whom we thought was motionless is in fact orbiting around the

observed sun, but on the contrary, that the subject is central to the process of knowledge” (118). Rather than intensify Copernicus’s revolution, which revealed a view of the world existing absolutely independent of human consciousness, Kant in effect assuages its impact by restoring to the human mind a central place in the world. Even his notorious notion of the thing-in-itself, by which Kant seems to institute the existence of an absolutely unrelated, rather contributes to his counter-revolution, because he maintains that although it is unknowable, it is thinkable (Meillassoux 31). Herein lies the beginning of the rule of the philosophical doctrine which Meillassoux calls “correlationism,” a doctrine which maintains the primacy of the correlation between thinking and being over an object ‘in-itself’ (5). If Hume fanned the destructive flames of the scientific revolution of Copernicus and Galileo in the direction over which metaphysics had long established unchallengeable dominance by mercilessly demonstrating the “fallaciousness of all metaphysical forms of rationality,” Kant “exposes this collapse of metaphysics in its definitive and enduringly stable form by turning correlational knowledge into the only philosophically legitimate form of knowledge” (125). For this reason, Meillassoux deems the Kantian revolution as a “catastrophe” (124); as long as we abide with philosophy after Kant, we remain within the “correlationist circle” without access to a reality that lies absolutely outside it, even while natural science continues yielding the picture of a world not reducible to the correlation (5). Our task then, argues Meillassoux, consists in waking up from our “correlationist slumber” to face the challenge of understanding “how thought is able to access the uncorrelated, that is to say, a world capable of subsisting without being given” (128, 28).

This being said, it must be stressed that Meillassoux's point is not to be mistaken for a simple claim to renounce philosophy. On the contrary, Meillassoux maintains we must take up once more "the injunction to know the absolute"; by an 'absolute,' he means "a being whose *severance* (the original meaning of *absolutus*) and whose separateness from thought is such that it presents itself to us as non-relative to us, and hence as capable of existing whether we exist or not" (28). For Meillassoux, science and philosophy are not hostile to each other on the issue of the absolute; it is crude positivism that impoverishes *both* science and philosophy with its cold command to relinquish the quest for the absolute, while science itself "enjoins us to discover the source of its own absoluteness" (28).

At the same time, this invocation of the absolute should not be taken in any religious sense. Indeed, Meillassoux takes special pains to distance his project from any form of the 'postmodern' return of the religious. At the root of postmodernity lies an advanced version of correlationism, which Meillassoux calls "strong correlationism" in contradistinction from Kant's "weak correlationism." The difference can be summed up in terms of their treatment of the thing-in-itself: by contrast to Kant's claim that the in-itself is thinkable if unknowable, strong correlationism maintains that we can neither know nor think the in-itself; that, in other words, "there is nothing beyond phenomena" (35). Strong correlationists reach this belief in "radical finitude" through the strategy of "*absolutizing the correlation itself*," which consists in "re-inscribing every representation within the bounds of the correlationist circle" (37, 42-43). In this way, strong correlationism parts with the Kantian (and metaphysical) pretention to *think* the absolute, but this "end of metaphysics," in the sense of the 'de-absolutization of thought,'" results

in abandoning any rational approach to the absolute. It is precisely for this reason that postmodern correlationism has no way of staving off the unremitting incursion of fideism: “*by forbidding reason any claim to the absolute, the end of metaphysics has taken the form of an exacerbated return of the religious*” (45).

Now we can clearly see against what Meillassoux seeks to defend the absolute: the double-sided assault of fideism through its mystification of the absolute, on one hand, and of correlationism through its injunction to renounce thinking the absolute, on the other (to say nothing of the positivist nullification of the absolute). To carry out this task, argues Meillassoux, we must discover an “ontological truth” that is “invulnerable to correlationist scepticism,” that is, a firm mooring point with which to ground an absolute necessity in the midst of the capricious weather of postmodern relativism (52). But at the same time, this ontological truth must not entail a transcendental object that will allow fideism to thrive on it. Hence it is incumbent upon us to “*uncover an absolute necessity that does not reinstate any form of absolutely necessary entity*” (34). According to Meillassoux, we can arrive at such an absolute without an absolute entity by pushing the notion of “facticity,” which is to be found at the heart of strong correlationism, further than its advocates. For strong correlationists such as Wittgenstein and Heidegger, the “facticity of correlationist forms”—invariant elements that supposedly provide the minimum organization of representation—is “just the mark of our essential *finitude*,” as well as of the finitude of the world itself; for instance, what we experience with the facticity invoked by the two philosophers, which Meillassoux calls the “facticity of the ‘there is,’” is not so much an absolute *per se* as our necessary inability to know the absolute ground of what is (40-42). The facticity of the correlation, in other words, surely

vindicates the necessity of the correlationist circle, but it is merely a necessity *for us* within the circle; we are permanently not entitled to know an absolute necessity that can subsist without us. Meillassoux, on the other hand, maintains that facticity will turn out to be a knowledge of the absolute if we “*put back into the thing itself what we mistakenly took to be an incapacity in thought*” (53). Meillassoux’s explanation is worth quoting at length:

instead of construing the absence of reason inherent in everything as a limit that thought encounters in its search for the ultimate reason, we must understand that this absence of reason *is*, and can *only* be the *ultimate* property of the entity. We must convert facticity into the real property whereby everything and every world *is* without reason, and is thereby *capable of actually becoming otherwise without reason*. We must grasp how the ultimate absence of reason, which we will refer to as ‘unreason,’ is an absolute ontological property, and not the mark of the finitude of our knowledge. From this perspective, the failure of the principle of reason follows, quite simply, from the *falsity* . . . of such a principle—for the truth is that there is no reason for anything to be or to remain thus and so rather than otherwise, and this applies as much to the laws that govern the world as to the things of the world. Everything could actually collapse: from trees to stars, from stars to laws, from physical laws to logical laws; and this not by virtue of some superior law whereby everything is destined to perish, but by virtue of the absence of any superior law capable of preserving anything, not matter what, from perishing. (53)

By absolutizing facticity, Meillassoux postulates the “principle of unreason,” by which he means “the absolute necessity of the contingency of everything” (60-62). As Meillassoux emphasizes, this “absolute contingency” must not be confused with the empirical contingency of material objects, or the sense of precariousness connoted in such commonsensical statement as ‘everything is perishable’ (62).<sup>14</sup> The absolute facticity of

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<sup>14</sup> Meillassoux’s thesis that the laws can change without reason must also be distinguished from the obviously false claim that the laws will *frequently* change for no reason; if we accept the direct translation from the first to the second position, we cannot but reject the first proposition in favor of the common belief in causal necessity. The thesis simply states the possibility that the laws can change at any time, which by no means excludes the possibility that they can last for a very long time. See Meillassoux 94-103.

contingency rather pertains to a different level than that of empirical facts; “I can doubt the permanence of facts, but I cannot doubt the permanence of facticity without thereby reiterating it as an absolute” (73). Meillassoux designates this domain of the “non-factual essence of fact as such” with the neologism “factuality” [*factualité*], and proposes to call what he has so far explained by the name of the principle of unreason the “principle of factuality” for the purpose of avoiding the “inconvenience of being purely negative” (79).<sup>15</sup>

It should be clear by now what lies behind Meillassoux’s advancing the principle of factuality, according to which “contingency *alone* is necessary” (80). Yet, before coming back to Douglass we still need to examine why Meillassoux retains the connotation of ‘fact’ in coining the term ‘factuality,’ even as he asserts that it does not belong to the common order of facts. An explication of the meaning of “speculative materialism” with which Meillassoux characterizes his philosophical position will clarify the issue (121). By ‘speculative,’ he indicates that his philosophical program aims to know the aforementioned non-factual essence of fact as such (thus ‘factuality’ is said to refer to the “speculative essence of facticity”) (79). As far as this strand of the project is concerned, Meillassoux’s position is indistinguishable from Hegel’s so-called “speculative idealism,” which likewise seeks to penetrate objective reality to reach the conceptual essence of the absolute; in particular, the two philosophers both maintain “the necessity of a moment of irremediable contingency in the unfolding of the absolute” (38, 80). What separates Meillassoux from Hegel, on the other hand, is that whereas in the latter, contingency is

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<sup>15</sup> The distinction between ‘facticity’ [*facticité*] and ‘factuality’ [*factualité*] corresponds to the contrast Meillassoux has drawn between the French term ‘*factuel*’ (‘factual’ in English) and the neologism ‘*factuel*’ (rendered as ‘factual’ in English). See the English translator Ray Brassier’s note (133n6).

derived from a Whole of the absolute Spirit, which “in itself, *qua* rational totality, is devoid of contingency,” the former deduces the necessity of contingency from “contingency as such and contingency alone” (80). The question should be asked here: what enables Hegel to presuppose so readily an overarching totality that is ontologically superior to the necessity of contingency even as he regards contingency as constitutive of that totality? It can be argued that the most potent factor involved in the Hegelian totalization of Spirit is his correlationist obliteration of resistant materiality that can enjoy an autonomous existence; Hegel’s idealism captures the external factuality of material objects within the correlation as it deduces their non-factual essence as internal to a Whole. By contrast, Meillassoux’s ‘materialism’ preserves the prosaic factuality of facts as it is because the absolute necessity that it seeks to grasp resides precisely in the irrevocable exteriority of factual matters. Thus, if the term ‘factuality’ strides over both fact as such and its non-factual essence, it thereby encapsulates the difficulty and ambition with which Meillassoux proceeds through the philosophical field populated with commanding advocates of correlationism towards a speculative materialism.<sup>16</sup>

What does Meillassoux’s speculative materialism reveal for our discussion of Douglass’s act of freedom, then? First, we can no longer start from the metaphysical opposition between the deterministic causality of nature and the freedom of the human will. This opposition, according to which there is no freedom in the natural world, is likely to immure philosophical inquiries of freedom in the question of free will. By

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<sup>16</sup> This does not mean that Meillassoux’s speculative materialism is completely free of its own problems. As Ray Brassier points out, most notably Meillassoux’s recourse to the notion of “the veritable *intellectual intuition* of the absolute” needs to be questioned (Meillassoux 82; Brassier 83-94).

contrast, Meillassoux's proposition implies the possibility that we may rather ground free will on a freedom in the physical world.<sup>17</sup>

Second, we must be wary of the ubiquitous pitfalls of correlationism which are prone to obscure the irreducibility of a material reality. It is crucial for us to adhere to a materialism even when our task is to grasp the essence of a matter. At the same time, it must be observed that we are not given beforehand a clear definition of our materialism, since we, after Kant, can no longer assume the transparency of objective reality; even if it has been a 'catastrophe,' it would be unwise for us to entirely abandon the Kantian heritage in this domain. Accordingly, it is incumbent upon us to labor on each matter in hand and thereby to work out a provisional form of materialism, just as the Hegelian Concept [*Begriff*] is not allowed to make an instant leap forward to the Absolute and instead has to work sedulously on objects in the world to reach its goal. To that extend, our materialism needs to be both Kantian and Hegelian, but definitely minus a correlationist Whole.

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<sup>17</sup> In this connection, it would be interesting to compare Meillassoux's view with Daniel Dennett's. In *Freedom Evolves*, Dennett develops his *compatibilist* position, that is, the view that free will and determinism are ultimately compatible. Hume is a foremost philosopher in this tradition. Unlike Meillassoux, who maintains the absolute contingency of all, Dennett believes in the permanence of physical laws, but he argues the concept of inevitability implied in determinism "belongs at the design level, not the physical level," and assures us that determinism is "no threat to our most important thinking about possibilities and causes in our lives" (62). Dennett contrasts his compatibilism with *incompatibilism* ("if determinism is true, then we don't have free will"), in particular a kind of *libertarianism* deduced from the "indeterminism of quantum physics" (97-98). Meillassoux's position is to be distinguished from this type of libertarianism in that he derives his theory not from quantum physics but from the very logic that has animated philosophical discourse, and that it accordingly bears substantial relevance to our conception of free will. Dennett, meanwhile, is not a correlationist insofar as his theory grants nature a full autonomy. For a critique of Dennett, especially his "dual ontology" of design and physics, see Žižek, *The Parallax View* 237-41.



Third, we are philosophically justified in talking about a ‘facticity’ of freedom, whether in the sense of the factuality of absolute contingency or in the sense in which Dennett argues free will is “real.”<sup>18</sup> In spite of our knowledge that the causal fabric of the world is largely determined by physical laws, and in spite of the not easily dispelled perception that men in general do not seek freedom,<sup>19</sup> the world doesn’t make sense without our first accepting a degree of freedom as an irreducible given. Although it is extremely elusive, freedom is a factual matter that cannot be dismissed as a mere illusion.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> “Free will is real, but it is not a preexisting feature of our existence, like the law of gravity. . . . Free will is like the air we breathe, and it is present almost everywhere we want to go, but it is not eternal, it evolved, and is still evolving. . . . It is an evolved creation of human activity and beliefs, and it is just as real as such other human creations as music and money. And even more valuable” (Dennett 11, 13).

<sup>19</sup> This skeptical sentiment was voiced by the Russian radical Alexander Herzen (1812-70), who, like his contemporary Frederick Douglass, devoted his entire life to the pursuit of personal and political liberty. With irony, Herzen remarked that Rousseau’s celebrated declaration that men are born free amounts to saying “Fish were born to fly, yet everywhere they swim.” “Why should man alone,” Herzen sarcastically asked, “be classified in terms of what at most small minorities here or there have ever sought for its own sake, still less actively fought for?” (Berlin, Introduction 51-52n3; see also Berlin, *Russian Thinkers* 107-08).

<sup>20</sup> This formulation begs the question: since when freedom is a ‘fact’? Meillassoux seems to suggest, on one hand, we humans knew this fact—or at least the ‘fact’ of absolute contingency—from the first. But his argument also implies, on the other hand, that it was only with the scientific revolution that a non-correlationist mode of thinking came into being; before this event, the Ptolemaic worldview prevailed, in which human beings thought of themselves as the immovable center of the world. For Dennett, meanwhile, free will is a product of evolution which is still ongoing (see note 18 above). There are many other arguments concerning the emergence of freedom as a political idea. Berlin, for instance, claims that personal liberty “is comparatively modern. There seems to be scarcely any discussion of individual liberty as a conscious political ideal (as opposed to its actual practice) in the ancient world” (“Two Concepts” 176). In response to Berlin’s view, Patterson argues that “freedom has been the core value of Western culture *throughout* its history. . . . There has been no lacuna in the Western idealization of freedom,” but at the same time makes the point that “there was both continuity and reconstruction; diffusion as well as adaptation and refiguration” (*Freedom* xii-xiii, xvi). For classical arguments of ancient and modern liberty, see Constant and Arendt.

But to take freedom as a 'given' in no way means a return to the Rousseauvian position holding that all men are naturally free; if that is the case, to rediscover one's own intrinsic freedom will suffice, and we don't need actively seek liberty anymore (hence a greater risk of the retreat to the inner citadel). This leads us to the fourth point Meillassoux's theory illuminates. The factuality of contingency is an absolute possibility, a possibility that entails radical alterity, everything's "capacity-to-be-wholly-other," my "capacity-not-to-be," and "the *possible transition*, devoid of reason, of my state towards any other state whatsoever" (56-57). The 'given' of absolute contingency is different from all the other given in that it is nothing other than the pure capacity-to-be-other relative to the latter given. In an attempt to differentiate 'contingency' from 'chance' (as the two words are so often confused with each other), Meillassoux illustrates the dimension of radical alterity involved in the experience of absolute contingency with the term's etymology. He points out that the term 'chance' is originally related to the meaning of 'game of dice' and thus implies the notion of a predetermined totality, according to which all possibilities are calculable. By contrast,

the term 'contingency' refers back to the Latin *contingere*, meaning 'to touch, to befall,' which is to say, that which happens, but which happens enough to happen to us. The contingent, in a word, is *something that finally happens*—something other, something which, in its irreducibility to all pre-registered possibilities, puts an end to the vanity of a game wherein everything, even the improbable, is predictable. When something happens to us, when novelty grabs us by the throat, then no more calculation and no more play. . . . (108)

It can be argued, then, that in a true experience of freedom, I do not only 'touch upon' an absolute but something that is completely unpredictable 'falls upon' me (Meillassoux 59). I can will freedom and can act according to that will, but I have to carry out the act of freedom without preconceiving all its consequences insofar as it involves radical alterity.

The element of alterity makes my act of freedom irreducible to my free will from which it results. Accordingly, free will is insufficient if it remains by itself and is not complemented by an act through which I experience *my* capacity-to-be-wholly-other as something wholly other actually happens to me.

From this perspective, the reason why the act of freedom is so significant for Douglass can be sketchily outlined. Although willing freedom, and determining upon escaping faithfully to the will, are certainly crucial steps in his attainment of liberty, these psychological actions do not suffice for him to ‘touch’ upon a fact of freedom—there needs to be some physical act which completes the determination in such a radical manner that it brings something entirely unexpected unto him and consequently evidences the fact that he is also entitled to be wholly other. Once the true meaning of Douglass’s claim appreciated, we can see the degree to which the centrality of the act to his narrative of personal liberty poses a serious challenge to theories of freedom, whether philosophical or political, which tend to neglect the dimension of the act. Can we conceive a theory of social liberty which does not, as Mill’s and Berlin’s do, exclude the act of freedom, and which therefore demands a fundamentally different conceptualization of the contour of the political? But to comprehend the real significance of Douglass’s act of freedom, every step that leads to the crux must be unpacked in detail. Although Douglass carries out the act as if it were a leap into the void where he cannot know in advance what will come next and where he realizes he is by far freer than he knew, the leap is made possible only by a long process in which he comes to terms with the idea of freedom.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE VOICE AS THE MATERIAL ORIGIN OF THE IDEA OF FREEDOM

In this chapter I argue that the voice constituted a core, or more precisely a rupture, around which the idea of freedom crystallized in the mind of Douglass in his infancy. The voice has two inseparable yet contradictory facets: the vibrant conveyer of meaning and the inert stuff on which meaning is extrinsically attached.<sup>21</sup> When we are hearing, for instance, an eloquent orator fluently speaking about a social issue, his voice is the transparent bearer of meaning, but once he begins to stutter, we suddenly lose track of his meaning, and the recalcitrant materiality of the voice becomes salient to the point that it appears utterly extraneous to signification. In the sociopolitical sphere today, what matters is primarily the first aspect of the voice: the right to freedom of speech and expression, for example, consists in people raising their voice articulate enough to get a certain definite message across. The voice's close connection to politics is tellingly illustrated by the fiction of *vox populi, vox Dei*, in which the figure of people's voice is invoked as a manipulative means for what Berlin describes as a "monstrous impersonation." By some sleight of hand, the ruler impersonates the 'people' who supposedly represent the supreme will of God and on their behalf speaks of the 'true' meaning of their unheard voice, even though in reality none of these people has any say in the matter.<sup>22</sup>

The above pointed out issue's pertinence to my discussion of an African American narrative will become clear if we take into account the striking frequency with which a

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<sup>21</sup> This is the point Mladen Dolar makes in his book *A Voice and Nothing More* (15). I will refer to Dolar's study several times in this chapter.

<sup>22</sup> For the historical origin of the adage *vox populi, vox Dei*, see Dolar, *A Voice* 111-12.

similar monstrous impersonation appears in the relationship between blacks and whites. It was a common practice among white slaveholders to ‘capture’ black voice as raw material on which a proper significance was to be conferred.<sup>23</sup> A scene from Fanny Kemble’s *Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation, 1838-1839* illustrates the point. Kemble was a British actress married to an American slaveholder who owned a plantation and more than six hundred slaves on the Sea Islands of Georgia. During her stay on the estate, her “daily voyages up and down the river” introduced her to “a great variety of new musical performances of our boatmen, who invariably . . . accompany the stroke of their oars with the sound of their voices” (259). Fascinated by these “negro boat songs,” she tried to find out a common melodic base from which they derived in vain:

I thought I could trace distinctively some popular national melody with which I was familiar in almost all their songs; but I have been quite at a loss to discover any such foundation for many that I have heard lately, and which have appeared to me extraordinarily wild and unaccountable. The way in which the chorus strikes in with the burden, between each phrase of the melody chanted by a single voice, is very curious and effective, especially with the rhythm of the rowlocks for accompaniment. The high voices all in unison, and the admirable time and true accent with which their responses are made, always make me wish that some great musical composer could hear these semi-savage performances. (259-60)

Generally sympathetic to slaves, Kemble was on the verge of discovering a distinct slave culture that was “extraordinary wild and unaccountable.” A moment after, however, she disengaged herself from the irresistible attraction of black songs and calmly put herself in a third party’s position from which she wondered how “some great musical composer” would handle the raw stuff. Between a hypothetical white “foundation” and a prospective white artistic production, the originality of black music vanishes. “Semi-savage” and therefore not quite up to civilized standards, the slave performances need to be adapted

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<sup>23</sup> I’m here alluding to the “capture of speech” which Michel de Certeau discussed in a different context. See especially Certeau 11-24.

by the hands of white musicians. “With a very little skillful adaptation and instrumentation,” she adds, “I think one or two barbaric chants and choruses might be evoked from them that would make the fortune of an opera” (260). As with a number of widely performed cultural practices of the day, such as the minstrel show, Kemble’s projected musical enterprise manifests the will to take advantage of black culture for its own sake. In *Love and Theft*, Eric Lott terms this fundamental cultural mechanism characteristically operating between blacks and whites “cultural robbery” (8). I would rather call it cultural paternalism to emphasize its relevance to the issue of social liberty discussed in the Introduction.<sup>24</sup> How deep the roots of cultural paternalism ran could be measured by the fact that the account was given by an outsider who would be decidedly “prejudiced against slavery” and who boasted of “the carefulness of my observation, and the accuracy of my report, of every detail of the working of the thing that comes under my notice” (Kemble 11).<sup>25</sup>

Thus cultural paternalism consists in one group’s justification for speaking on behalf of a subordinate group on the ground that the latter lacks civilization and reason. But what if those voices of ‘unreason’ are given the full scope to express themselves in their own right? What if, in other words, the raw matter supposedly devoid of reason is allowed to speak its own language of unreason, which constitutes the very essence of

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<sup>24</sup> For a detailed analysis of Southern paternalism, see Genovese, especially 3-7.

<sup>25</sup> It is important to note in this connection that while Kemble acknowledges the extraordinary provocative power of slave songs, this fact does not elevate the slave singers higher than sub-human species in her esteem. She comments on one of the singing slaves, named Isaac, in mock surprise: “By-the-by, this individual *does* speak, and therefore, I presume he is not an ape, orangoutang, chimpanzee, or gorilla; but I could not, I confess, have conceived it possible that the presence of articulate sounds, and the absence of an articulate tail, should make, externally at least, so completely the only appreciable difference between a man and a monkey, as they appear to do in this individual ‘black brother’” (260).

reason, not a mere limit of it, as Meillassoux's 'principle of unreason' suggests? The voice has been a frequently visited site in the scholarship on African American narrative, but up until relatively recently scholars tended to focus on the 'reasonable' use of voice, such as the narrative framing device by means of which white authorities censored black speech.<sup>26</sup> More recently, however, critics have called attention to the aspect of black voice which is liable to be considered as insignificant in the critical perspective where too much stress is laid on meaningfulness and legibility. Houston Baker, for example, argues that one main task of the Afro-American criticism resides in discovering "narrative transformations and inscriptions of low moans and hollers, whoops and rolling basses, high-pitched laments and sassy condemnations" (*Blues* 113-14). In a similar vein, Paul Gilroy proposes a new model of political practice fundamentally different from the existing "politics of fulfillment," which presupposes a given political and social agenda that present society has left unaccomplished but a future society will realize (37). Gilroy calls this emerging horizon of political practice the "politics of transfiguration," and maintains that it aims at a Nietzschean "transvaluation of all values," through which "qualitatively new desires, social relations, and modes of association within the racial community of interpretation *and* between that group and its erstwhile oppressors" will come into being (36-37). Significantly, Gilroy locates the politics of transfiguration on "a lower frequency where it is played, danced, and acted, as well as sung and sung about, because words . . . will never be enough to communicate its unsayable claims to truth" (37). Drawing on Baker's and Gilroy's points, I would argue that the sudden eruption of deafening cries and uncertain sounds in Douglass's text carries unsayable claims to truth

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<sup>26</sup> On the white authenticating device, see note 2 above.

not encompassed by the proclaimed goals of abolitionist politics that the narrative openly endorses. The voices and sounds open for Douglass a passage to the idea of freedom which is not localizable on any single political agenda. Yet, it must be observed that this aural ‘origin’ is not the positive ground on which the idea of freedom grows; as I will argue, it rather plays the role of a vanishing mediator in the gradual process in which the idea takes shape in Douglass’s mind.

Before moving on to discuss Douglass’s text, another pitfall that we are likely to encounter in approaching the issue of voice must be mentioned: the aestheticization of the voice. Kemble’s observation on the black boatmen’s songs illustrates the point: by transmuting the slave voice into an aesthetic object, she has neutralized its uncanny appeal, so that she can safely approach it just like ordinary consumable objects without seeing its native link with the desolate reality of slavery from which the songs have sprung. As Dolar points out, “[t]he aesthetic concentration on the voice loses the voice precisely by turning it into a fetish object” (*A Voice* 4). A corollary of this problem can be found in the musical aestheticization of sound in general. As Douglas Kahn has argued, the consistent privileging of music as the art of sound in modern Western culture has made it difficult to appraise sounds that do not conform to the standards of musicality (37). Music has asserted so overwhelming a presence that all other sorts of sounds marred by “the contaminating effects of the world” have remained virtually unheard (Kahn 37). Following Kahn’s lead, historian Mark M. Smith seeks to include noise and silence in the history of sound in his work (*Listening to Nineteenth-Century America; Sensing the Past* 41-58). This chapter takes these cautions against the aestheticization of sound seriously,



and traces the vicissitudes of voices on Douglass's text without treating them as objects of aesthetic pleasure.

### **THE BEATING OF HESTER**

*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* is organized around a handful of key scenes in which the voice plays a crucial role. Douglass's initiation into slavery is signaled by a penetrating voice. A slave kid on Colonel Lloyd's plantation, Douglass was literally aroused from the sweet if not untroubled slumber of infantile ignorance by foreboding cries that cut through the twilight of morning and opened his eyes to a darker reality of slavery: "I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine" (18).<sup>27</sup> Aunt Hester, the female slave who raised the cries, was undergoing a severe trial of flogging. She was whipped by "Old Master" Aaron Anthony, who had resented her disobedience to his order not to see Ned Roberts, a slave belonging to a neighboring estate. What motives lied behind this order, what emotional complications provoked the master's repeated explosions of anger, "may be safely left to conjecture," as Douglass puts it (19). All that can be said with certainty is that she was "a woman of noble form, and of graceful proportions, having very few equals, and fewer superiors, in personal appearance, among the colored or white women of our neighborhood" (19). And, as Douglass will note in his second autobiography, in the world in which chattel slavery was a legitimate institution, personal beauty was nothing less than a "curse" to the slave girl who possesses it (175). Aside from the separation from his mother, which ultimately remained obscure in his memory,

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<sup>27</sup> It might be interesting to compare Hester's shrieks with the opening beeping sound of an alarm clock in Wright's *Native Son*. While devoid of definite meaning for the hearers, they both signal the presence of an extremely hostile, invincible force.

witnessing the flagellation of Aunt Hester is the first major event in Douglass's

*Narrative*:

[Anthony] used to tie [her] up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin. I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I well remember it. I never shall forget it whilst I remember any thing. It was the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant. It struck me with awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. (18)

Aunt Hester's cries announced the coming series of ordeals Douglass had to go through, of which this event is not just an instance but constitutes a narrative core around which his retrospective narration revolves. Significantly, Douglass omits telling how he came to watch the whipping after he heard the cries, thus giving the impression that hearing the voice directly led to the witnessing. (He makes clear in *My Bondage and My Freedom* that he was actually peeping through cracks opened in the boards that separated his closet from the kitchen in which the flogging took place (176)). The smooth transition from the audible to the visible, or the narrative maneuvering for that effect, allows the initiating cries to reverberate through the whole scene. As William Andrews points out, Douglass's characteristic use of repetition in this description is effective in impressing upon his reader "the immitigable, metronomic rhythm of a whipping" (132). The reader hears Douglass's tensely rhythmic language that evokes the spectacle of flagellation in the aural void opened up by the piercing voice, which the *Narrative* strives to represent but whose purely sonorous force remains unrepresentable. An impossible point of reference that refuses to be pinned down in writing, Aunt Hester's shrieks leave a space that awaits

subsequent conjuration of visual objects. The voice first emerges as a partial object of perception, which drives its hearer in search of its source, and the hearer then discovers the source in which the voice and the image are synchronized. The detached vocal piece is integrated into the full image of the tortured body. In the process, the complete picture displaces and overshadows the imperfect 'image' of the body aurally conveyed. The visual predominates at the cost of the audible, even as the latter feeds into it. The "horrible exhibition" strikes Douglass as well as the reader with its "awful force," but this stroke also makes us forget how irresistible the force of the unidentified cries that originally ushered us into the scene was.

The flogging of Aunt Hester was so central to Douglass's memory and narrative revision of his own life as to gain a status that approximates to the Freudian "primal fantasy." According to Freud, the primal fantasy (also called the primal scene) is "the phantasy of watching sexual intercourse between the parents"—a phantasy that demonstrates the existence of something that is "bound to assert itself compulsively in the patient" ("A Case of Paranoia" 269). Indeed, Aunt Hester is a surrogate figure for Douglass's mother, from whom he was separated "before I knew her as my mother," and whose "soothing presence" he had "never . . . enjoyed, to any considerable extent" (15, 16). Hired in a plantation twelve miles far-off and denied any chance to see her son except at night, the mother remains a dim figure in her child's recollection, such that she is easily supplanted by the vivid image of Aunt Hester. As for Aaron Anthony, Douglass mentions that "[t]he opinion was . . . whispered that my master was my father" (15). Though in *My Bondage and My Freedom* he calls into question the correctness of this rumor by adding "it was only a whisper, and I cannot say that I ever gave it credence"

(156), there is little to argue against the idea that Anthony embodies Douglass's "first father image," most prominently in the version of his life presented in the first autobiography (Preston 23). That the father-substitute and the mother-substitute are engaged in a cruel show of aggression and suffering—with its unmistakably erotic dimension—qualifies the scene as a preeminent traumatic event that is "bound to assert itself compulsively" in its observer's memory, and which Douglass would time and again revisit in his autobiographies.

As a primal fantasy, the beating of Aunt Hester involves a palpable degree of sexual investment, and this makes Douglass's enterprise particularly vulnerable to censure. Indeed, Douglass emphasizes Hester's nakedness in what follows the above quoted sequence, and recounts—or perhaps even reconstructs, because he is not supposed to have witnessed what happened *before* the whipping—how the master undressed his beautiful slave in his licentious preparation for flogging: "Before he commenced whipping Aunt Hester, he took her into the kitchen, and stripped her from neck to waist, leaving her neck, shoulders, and back, entirely naked" (19). As Douglass biographer William McFeely puts it, such an eroticized account "went not to his readers' brains, but to their groins. The long reach of racist sexuality made the story for them an exercise in sadomasochistic eroticism, rather than an exploration of the complexities of the sadistic but also self-interested lustful motivation of the man who did the whipping" (180). In her book *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman also points out that repeated scenes of flagellation, Douglass's prominent among them, can "reinforce the spectacular character of black suffering," and alerts us to "the ease with which such scenes are usually reiterated, the casualness with which they are circulated, and the consequences of this

routine display of the slave's ravaged body" (3). For Hartman, Douglass's "terrible spectacle" (*Narrative* 18) eventually turns its readers into "voyeurs fascinated with and repelled by exhibitions of terror and sufferance" (3). Hartman draws on the central thesis of Elaine Scarry's groundbreaking study in the structure of torture and its multifarious social dimensions, *The Body in Pain*, which asserts that torture "converts the vision of suffering into the wholly illusory but, to the torturers and the regime they represent, wholly convincing spectacle of power" (27). In a similar vein, Karen Halttunen calls attention to the paradoxical historical process in which the early nineteenth-century literature of humanitarian reform was a breeding ground for what she calls the "pornography of pain" (318). Though she does not mention Douglass, the flogging scenes in his autobiographies can be readily positioned within the same historical constellation she has delineated, in which "sexual flagellation" played a paradigmatic role (315). (Halttunen's examples include the flogging of Uncle Tom in Stowe's antislavery bestseller, which Douglass's *Narrative* presumably influenced.) Jenny Franchot also makes the point that Douglass's descriptions betray a "paradoxical exploitation of the very feminine that they seek to rescue" (148). Instead of giving voice to female slaves, she argues, Douglass uses their scarred bodies as a springboard, and in the same stroke effectively sends them to a dim background, to attain his own masculinity.

While all these criticisms are worthy of reflection, it still remains unclear on what ground of identification such ideological foreclosures took place. If, as Franchot puts it, Aunt Hester's lacerated back "covers over, with violent materiality, the void at the base of Douglass's identity" (141), what exactly is the nature of this 'cover' cut through with numerous gashes that threaten to strike and engulf the observer with their violent

materiality? Is this cover really as secure as Franchot claims it to be, secure enough to provide a solid foothold that separates the masculine spectator from the female subject of spectacle and ultimately enables a “complete identification” (142)? Moreover, what is the status of the central void of identity the cover is supposed to protect? If Douglass was fatherless and suffered from a yawning void of identification—a man “without an intelligible beginning in the world,” in his words (*My Bondage and My Freedom* 157)—does not his fearful fascination with the voice of a familiar woman raised to an extraordinary pitch signal an elementary form of identification rather than a “loss of identity” as Franchot argues (142)? Does not the characterization of the space of subjectivity as empty where there is a singular voice unmistakably heard undo the primary ground of identification this voice prepared and inscribe the clear-cut order of sexual division over the complex texture of intersubjective formation, thus repeating the very gesture of repression Douglass is held responsible for on the ground that he enhances the visual image of a suffering female slave at the cost of resistant grains of the voice? Isn’t it arguable that Hester’s vanishing though lingering cries, with a subtle but not less violent force than the spectacle that accommodates them, destabilizes the alleged empty closure of subjectivity? What consequences follow, if the void at the base of identity is not something that must be covered up, not a dark spot of subjectivity, but the very space in which subjectivity emerges as it hears the echoes that reverberate in it? What if, as Jean-Luc Nancy suggests, the subject is first and foremost “a resonant subject, an intensive spacing of a rebound that does not end in any return to self without immediately relaunching, as an echo, a call to that same self” (*Listening* 21)? What’s more, if the beating of Hester is Douglass’s primal fantasy, does that immediately mean

that this fantasy is completely and without fail captured within a pornographic or masculine regime? Is there no deficiency, excess, or breach in the primal fantasy that makes it deviate from the voyeuristic demands of the (supposedly male) reader for visual pleasure and derails the specular scenario that putatively feeds into male subjectivity?

It is important in this connection to recall once again that while the whipping of Hester certainly has elements of the specular fantasy (Douglass peeping at his mother-substitute being whipped by his father-substitute, with the subject of seeing securely separated from the object of vision and violence by a screen), the event is temporally preceded by and structurally predicated on the penetrating voice. Incidentally, in one of the case studies that led Freud to the formulation of the theory of the primal scene some seventy years later, a sound set a libidinous phantasy into play, too. The patient, a beautiful single woman of thirty years old, had been drawn into a love affair with a handsome colleague. One time when she was in his apartment and began making love with him, she was “suddenly frightened by a noise, a kind of knock or click” (“A Case of Paranoia” 264). Puzzled as to its cause, she left the apartment, and some time later came to the conclusion that “someone acting on instructions from her lover had watched and photographed her during their intimate *tête-à-tête*” (269). Freud comments on this case,

The accidental noise was . . . playing the part of a provoking factor which activated the typical phantasy of overhearing which is a component of the parental complex. Indeed, it is doubtful whether we can rightly call the noise “accidental.” . . . such noises are on the contrary an indispensable part of the phantasy of listening, and they reproduce either the sounds which betrays parental intercourse or those by which the listening child fears to betray itself. (269)

Besides the plain gaps in time and place, there are a number of significant differences between Douglass’s flagellation scene and Freud’s case: for instance, while Douglass is the subject of seeing, Freud’s patient imagines being seen; moreover, the beating of Aunt

Hester is without doubt a real event, whereas what Freud's patient reports is supposedly an invention of her imagination. Despite these differences, however, the Freudian theory allows us to consider the two cases as variations of essentially the same "phantasy of listening," in which the subject of seeing can change roles with the object to be seen. In the case of Douglass, a sound implicates him in the event in which he watches the violent, latently sexual intercourse of the parental figures—a real event that however will eventually gain the dimension of fantasy.<sup>28</sup> In Freud's case, on the other hand, a noise triggers the fantasy of the patient catching her own self in the very midst of sexual arousal from the position of her censoring mother—because, as Freud puts it, "she herself *became* her mother" (269)—thus putting an immediate stop to the sexual acts she is actually engaged in. In spite of the different deployments of elements, both of these situations unfold themselves around a precursory sound. As Mladen Dolar points out concerning Freud's case study, "[a]t the origin of fantasy there is a traumatic kernel materialized by the voice, the noise—we should allow full latitude to a sonority not pertaining to language" (*A Voice* 133). This sonorous kernel of fantasy renders the primal scene not totally reducible to any structure modeled on language or specularity.<sup>29</sup>

If an indigestible core that resists representation is first introduced by Hester's voice, it remains throughout the scene in a predominant object that informs, and at the same time undercuts, the entire economics of scopophilic pleasure: blood. Douglass

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<sup>28</sup> Douglass biographer Dickson Preston notes concerning the episode of Hester's beating that there are people, "especially Eastern Shore whites," who "continue to believe that [Douglass] invented it, or extrapolated the incident from something he had heard." In any case, the very nature of the episode leads us to agree with Preston that the incident "was not, and is not, one to be held at arm's length and examined critically. It either happened or it did not" (68).

<sup>29</sup> For a further consideration of the "kernel of the voice" in relation to the Lacanian concept of the "mirror stage," see Dolar 39-42.



punctuates his rhythmic language that recounts the incident with the repeated image of blood, in such a way that the word, with its blunt, explosive sound, conveys a material sense of heavy blows and lacerations. In this sense, Douglass's blood is not quite an image, but rather an aural object that suspends at the limits of visual representation.<sup>30</sup> The partial, fleeting 'image' of blood eludes the full grasp of the regime of bodily spectacle, even as it plays a vital part in that regime, and undermines the voyeuristic distance between the subject and the object of seeing. It is worth noting here that just like the voice that heralds the spectacle of flogging, blood is a remainder as well as a reminder of the body. As Dolar persuasively argues, the voice is a bodily remainder which is not quite part of the body: "not only does it detach itself from the body and leave it behind, it does not fit the body either, it cannot be situated in it. . . . It floats. . . . It is a bodily missile which has detached itself from its source, emancipated itself, yet remains corporeal" (*A Voice* 73). In other words, both the voice and blood are "extra-corporeal, non-corporeal 'supplements' of the body" (Dolar, *A Voice* 81). Douglass's powerful language that narrates the whipping of Hester derives its captivating force not least from the sequencing of partial bodily objects such as voice and blood, which puts into action an uncanny interplay of presence and absence, such that they could at any time abolish the distance

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<sup>30</sup> In his celebrated essay "Critique of Violence," Walter Benjamin remarked that "blood is the symbol of mere life" [*das Symbol des blossen Lebens*] (250). I cannot unpack the meaning of this remark in detail here, but I have to point out that Benjamin aligns blood shedding with what he calls "mythic violence," which is exercised against mere life for its own "lawmaking" purpose, as opposed to "divine violence," which is "law-destroying" (249). In this sense, blood is the symbol not only of mere life but also of violence of sacrificing mere life for the sake of establishing and maintaining the order of the living. In other words, the symbol of blood is usually employed to the advantage of the order of representation, and yet, when brought to its extreme, it can also disrupt that order as bare life which is exploited and repressed by the order can erupt through it. For an illuminating commentary on Benjamin's remark, see Derrida, "Force of Law" 288.

that separates the subject of perception and the objective world of visible presence and strike the reader with the same “awful force” as that struck Douglass the observer.

The irreducible materiality of these partial bodily objects that Douglass’s narrative language never tires of evoking, with its excess over representation, demands more words be expended to gloss over the lapse of narrativity it threatens to create. It should be noted in this connection that even within the space of a few pages that deals with the whipping of Aunt Hester in his first autobiography, Douglass recounts the same scene twice: after the sentences I have already quoted, he briefly explains about Aunt Hester’s intimate relationship with Ned Roberts, and then he goes on to stage the flogging for the second time. While the dominant images in the first half of the description are cries and blood, the second half focuses on the temporal unfolding of the incident. In the first half the observer, and with him the reader, are thrown, as it were, *in medias res* to witness the scene, whereas in the second half Douglass details each stage of the procedure from the stripping and tying of Hester to the curses the master hurled at the suspended victim and finally comes back to the image of blood with which the description starts: “the warm, red blood (amid heart-rending shrieks from her, and horrid oaths from him) came dripping to the floor” (19). In other words, the first half centers on subjective images—or, objects that float in a liminal zone between subjectivity and objectivity to the extent that the shrieks and the blood have a material force that hits the core of subjectivity. The second version, on the other hand, provides a more distanced, or more ‘objective,’ so to speak, view on the event. Perhaps Douglass’s shrewdness as narrator is best illustrated by this juxtaposition of two viewpoints without obliterating their irreducible differences: if it were not for the second (objective) viewpoint, the reader would be left in a situation not

unlike that of the Freudian paranoid, permanently suspended in the atemporal space of eternal return and at the mercy of something that is “bound to assert itself compulsively”; without the first viewpoint, the description would fall short of conveying the subjective intensity of the experience which Douglass had to undergo.

When he revisits the whipping of Esther (Hester in the 1845 *Narrative*) in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass avoids meddling with the unruly presence of blood, perhaps for fear that the surfeit of gore might incur the charge of sensationalism and sadomasochistic eroticism. From the vantage point of being more than thirty years removed from the incident and having been free for half these years, now he is able to domesticate the troublesome memory far more securely than when he made the first attempt to put it down on paper. He shrewdly streamlines the entire account by expunging blood as cleanly as possible (except the passing mention in “[e]ach blow, vigorously laid on, brought screams as well as blood”) and also by integrating the two separate perspectives into one neatly unified narration. Still, Esther’s agonized voice asserts itself throughout the scene: he is awakened by “the shrieks and piteous cries of poor Esther,” and her screams are “most piercing,” even though they seem “only to increase his fury” (176-77). Significantly, this revised and shortened account reproduces some articulate words of Esther’s, however sparse, which were not in the first narrative: “‘*Have mercy; Oh have mercy*’ she cried; ‘*I won’t do so no more.*’” This may be deemed Douglass’s small attempt to have the silenced victim speak in her own words, which should add a historical weight of other people’s testimony to his narrative. Ironically, however, these reproduced words too readily conjure up the conventional image of a suffering female slave, which fatally delimits the indefinite amplitude of Esther’s piercing cries. If

Douglass takes pains to avoid a facile exploitation of slave experiences and to be true to the female slave's singular voice, that singularity is lost sight of in the overarching generality of its signification. Thus, the reverse side of the tidy unification in the second autobiography of what originally were discordant elements in the first is a resignation about language's ability to represent the bare violence of the real: "language has no power to convey a just sense of [the brutal castigation's] awful criminality" (177). If we are warranted in calling the narrative mode of the first autobiography 'obsessive,' *My Bondage and My Freedom* attains its synthetic perspective by wiping out the original text's obsessive remnants. Yet, such a purifying operation cannot be carried out without some cost. Lost in the process are, above all else, the linguistic vestiges of Douglass's untiring gyrating movement around the unrepresentable force of Esther's cries; the traces of linguistic labor left in the wake of his grappling with the medium of language; and the expressive elements of his language which short-circuit the gap between the medium of representation and what it aims to represent. Douglass's account of the whipping of his aunt in the first autobiography is pestered with such plain flaws as his undisguised fixation on blood and unabashed trading on the female slave's bare body and the consequential structural redundancy of dual presentation, but these flaws are not brought into the text without merit.

#### **THE NARRATIVE AND *MY BONDAGE AND MY FREEDOM***

The above argument illuminates the often-raised question concerning the differences between the 1845 *Narrative* and the 1855 second autobiography, a question which as a rule involves the judgment of their relative literary values in favor of one over the other. Since the times of their publications, the *Narrative* has customarily been

assumed to be preferable to, or at least more worthy of consideration than the later work, primarily for the simple reason that it forcefully captivated the imagination of American readers, while the other did not. For a long time literary critics dared not challenge this judgment, even if they had their own elaborate reasons for the preference. James Olney, for example, in an essay that examines several slave narratives including Douglass's in terms of "their status as autobiography and as literature," contends that "[f]or the purposes of the present essay—and also, I think, in general—the *Narrative* of 1845 is a much more interesting and a better book than Douglass's two later autobiographical texts. . . . These latter two are diffuse productions . . . that dissipate the focalized energy of the *Narrative* in lengthy accounts of post-slavery activities" (171-72n3).<sup>31</sup> More recently, however, a contrary critical trend, prominently beginning with William Andrews, has settled into place which prizes Douglass's deepened understanding of the dimensions of slavery as a social institution and its impact on his life in the second autobiography. "[W]hat was largely missing from the *Narrative*," argues Andrews, "—a sense of the complex relationship of its protagonist to his environment, especially in the South, along with an understanding of the significance of that complex relationship to the evolution of his character and the meaning of his life—is infused into *My Bondage and My Freedom*" (218). Following Andrews's lead, Eric Sundquist maintains that "*My Bondage and My Freedom* tell us far more about Douglass as a slave, and about slave culture generally, than does the *Narrative*, whose main virtue now, as in Douglass's own day, is pedagogical: it is easily absorbed and taught" (89). Likewise, McFeely considers *My Bondage and My Freedom* as the "strongest" of Douglass's three autobiographies, as

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<sup>31</sup> For other arguments that prefer the *Narrative* to *My Bondage and My Freedom*, see, for instance, Matlack; Stone 212-13.

“richer, deeper, and far more ambiguous” than the *Narrative*, even though his argument assumes that “the Frederick Douglass of the *Narrative* remains inviolate” and thus does not call into question the first autobiography’s smooth progress into the second (180, 116). By contrast, Andrews and Sundquist detect a great divide between the two books and emphasize a quantum leap in quality made in the later work.

My examination of Douglass’s accounts of the beating of Esther reveals the necessity of taking a position slightly different from either of those I have cited above. The *Narrative* and *My Bondage and My Freedom* are two culminations, each carrying its irreducible weight and thus not completely assimilable to either of the two, and this opposition was already present in a budding form as the apparently superfluous duplication of the single event in the first narrative. The two poles are dialectically opposed—not that one is a ‘synthesis’ that contains the other without remainder; rather, their opposition unfolds within a temporal process of development on which a synthetic perspective cannot be gained without seeing how one moment plays a constitutive part in the other. To put it in Hegelian terms, the second autobiography must be seen as *mediated* by the first, although this claim does not refute the idea that they are each *immediate*.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, my argument diverges from those in favor of *My Bondage and My Freedom* over the *Narrative*, in that I hold that the first autobiography has a primary status which is never to be cancelled by any later production and accordingly needs to be examined in its own right, even as I subscribe to the idea that the later text exhibits a more

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<sup>32</sup> “[I]mmediate *existence* is bound up with its mediation. The seed and the parents are immediate and initial existences in respect of the offspring which they generate. But the seed and the parents, though they exist and are therefore immediate, are yet in their turn generated; and the child, without prejudice to the mediation of its existence, is immediate, because it *is*. The fact that I am in Berlin, my immediate presence here, is mediated by my having made the journey hither” (*Hegel’s Logic* 102; see also *Hegel’s Logic* 17).

comprehensive view of the world in which slaves and slaveholders lived. At the same time, I take issue with those who see in the second autobiography a mere degeneration of the first, since in my view, as I have argued above, there was a dialectical tension between the two works; originally installed in the *Narrative*, this tension was a driving force behind the production of *My Bondage and My Freedom* ten years later as an essential response of his own to the first text. My stance may seem to risk the pitfall which Sundquist calls an “illusion of immediacy,” that is, making the *Narrative* more ‘authentic’ and its version of Douglass “closest to, and thus presumably best able to articulate, the experience of slavery,” while downplaying the Douglass of the second autobiography as a misleadingly fictionalized self so well adapted to the myth of ‘American’ identity (89).<sup>33</sup> My point is rather that if the *Narrative* is more ‘authentic,’ more immediate to his experience of slavery, precisely this immediacy is also likely to undermine the possibility of articulating that experience in an objective manner and thus

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<sup>33</sup> Interestingly, Olney praises the *Narrative* precisely because it fully expresses the myth of American identity. Slave narratives typically begin with the phrase “I was born . . . ,” which Olney equates with “the simple, existential claim: ‘I exist’” (155). Thus they share a central concern about selfhood with representative American autobiographical texts such as Benjamin Franklin’s. Yet, the slave narratives fail to develop this theme in any satisfactory manner, since they are overburdened with the rigidly fixed objective of revealing the truth of slavery and bringing about its abolition. This disqualifies the slave narrative for the title of “autobiography in any full sense” or that of “literature in any reasonable understanding of that term as an act of creative imagination.” Consequently, slave narratives “have no place in American Literature” (168). Douglass’s *Narrative*, on the other hand, “paradoxically transcends the slave narrative mode while being at the same time its fullest, most exact representative” in that it so deftly interweaves its proclaimed goal with the story of his own development (153-54). I have no objection to Olney’s take on Douglass’s *Narrative* as a paradigmatic but exceptional work of the slave narrative genre. I find questionable, however, Olney’s use of such terms as “creative imagination” and “American,” especially because he privileges these terms in such a way that the possibility that Douglass’s work goes beyond the limits of the “American imagination” is precluded. For a recent critique (even though still essentially “Americanist”) of Olney’s argument that the slave narrative as a rule does not deserve the status of autobiographical art, see Levine.

paradoxically calls for self-cancellation. An attempt to faithfully reproduce the “hell of slavery” is doomed to founder at a critical point, because the very intensity of his experience with this infernal reality creates a blind spot that makes it impossible to present it simultaneously as it is *and* in a form sufficiently amenable to the standards of objectivity, thus compromising the authenticity of narration from within itself. In this sense, what Douglass presents in the *Narrative*, most prominently in the whipping of Esther, is above all else the impasse of communicating the reality of slavery, the difficulty of conveying without any questionable display of descriptive violence the “awful force” with which he was plunged headlong into the “blood-stained gate” of slavery, the impossibility of articulating the bare material of experience which is exactly an enabling condition for his subsequent enterprise of narration.

#### **THE PEN IN THE GASHES**

From Douglass’s preoccupation with conveying the hideous reality of slavery through expressive language spring up striking images. As we have already seen, blood is one of such images, poised at the limits of visual representation. Another intriguing case crops up when we unexpectedly encounter an image that prematurely announces Douglass’s future writing skill in circumstances where no prospect of education is seen. In describing the harsh living condition of Colonel Lloyd’s plantation, Douglass observes that “[m]y feet have been so cracked with the frost, that the pen with which I am writing might be laid in the gashes” (33). This remarkable image, which has naturally drawn comments from critics,<sup>34</sup> deserves special notice on account of its mediating role, since the image enfolds in close juxtaposition the body and language (and in the same stroke

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<sup>34</sup> See, for instance, Stone; Olney 158; and Franchot 154-55.



the past of the narrated event and the present time of writing) in much the same way as the voice mediates between the body and language. As Dolar puts it, “the voice stands at a paradoxical and ambiguous topological spot, at the intersection of language and the body, but this intersection belongs to neither” (*A Voice* 73). The voice is the vanishing mediator between the body and language, the bodily vehicle of language, which nevertheless itself is detached from the body, and which evaporates in the air the moment language as such emerges.<sup>35</sup> Likewise, Douglass’s gashes function as a vanishing link between the body and language. The link appears on the brink of evaporation, because the gashes themselves have no material existence, or rather, they materialize only as an absence. It is this lack, the absence of flesh where it should be or where it used to be, that enables the placement of the pen in the otherwise smooth surface, and thus makes visible the unexpected contiguity of two seemingly separate categories. The gashes represent the sheer force of a mediating image, which metonymically connects the body and language and presents what would be unrepresentable otherwise. In this way, the same image also mediates the passage of sonority where no sound is heard except Douglass’s stifled groans in the dead coldness of his scanty sleeping bag.

### **THE SLAVE SONG**

*Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* further confirms the centrality of voice as it moves on to discuss slave songs a few pages later. Every month, several slaves on

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<sup>35</sup> Dolar borrows the phrase “vanishing mediator” from Fredric Jameson to describe the voice’s relationship with meaning: “the voice is . . . the quasi-natural bearer of the production of meaning, [and] it also proves to be strangely recalcitrant to it. If we speak in order to ‘make sense,’ to signify, to convey something, then the voice is the material support of bringing about meaning, yet it does not contribute to it itself. It is, rather, something like the vanishing mediator . . . it makes the utterance possible, but it disappears in it, it goes up in smoke in the meaning being produced” (Dolar, *A Voice* 15). For the vanishing mediator, see Jameson’s article of the same title.

Douglass's plantation were sent on an errand to the Great House Farm, the residence and home estate of Colonel Edward Lloyd, to receive allowances on behalf of all the other slaves. Since it was deemed a great honor among the slaves—besides, of course, being a respite from hard work and merciless lashes—to be chosen as representatives, it seems almost a matter of course that those selected expressed their joy on these occasions: while on their way, “they would make the dense old woods, for miles around, reverberate with their wild songs.” These songs are apparently quite childlike and harmless, as illustrated by the phrase Douglass quotes: “I am going away to the Great House Farm! / O, yea! O, yea! O!” As if to counter the reader's too stereotypical expectation of the idyllic, however, Douglass hastens to add that these songs were “revealing at once the highest joy and the deepest sadness” (23). Since his escape from slavery, he has come across a number of Northerners who “speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness” (24). These people are completely misunderstanding, argues Douglass, because far from straightforwardly expressing their emotions, the slaves “would sometimes sing the most pathetic sentiment in the most rapturous tone, and the most rapturous sentiment in the most pathetic tone.” There are deeper semantic registers in slave songs, which escape the attention of superficial observers. For this reason, the words of slave songs “to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but . . . nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves” (23-24). White observers typically took black voices not as expressing the enslaved people's intense feelings but as mere raucous and unruly noise, especially because their perception was filtered through what Shane White and Graham White describe as “mainstream Christianity's distrust of emotionalism and its acceptance of reason as an important (though not wholly sufficient) path to religious truth” (257).

Even Douglass did not discover the underlying layer of meaning in the songs he heard as a child until many years later when he looked back on the incidents from the vantage point of no longer residing within a slaveholding community:

I did not, when a slave, understand the deep meaning of those rude and apparently incoherent songs. I was myself within the circle; so that I neither saw nor heard as those without might see and hear. They told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension. . . . Every tone was a testimony against slavery, and a prayer to God for deliverance from chains. The hearing of those wild notes always depressed my spirit, and filled me with ineffable sadness. I have frequently found myself in tears while hearing them. The mere recurrence to those songs, even now, afflicts me; and while I am writing these lines, an expression of feeling has already found its way down my cheek. To those songs I trace my first glimmering conception of the dehumanizing character of slavery. I can never get rid of that conception. Those songs still follow me, to deepen my hatred of slavery, and quicken my sympathies for my brethren in bonds. (24)

A curious thing about the above description is that in spite of the attention called to the “deep meaning,” Douglass at this point does not elucidate it except saying that the songs recount “a tale of woe” and that they gave him the first intimation of “the dehumanizing character of slavery.” The focus here then, is not only the meaning itself but also the very gap between the apparent meaninglessness of the slave song and its hidden plenitude of deep meaning, between its ostensible gaiety and its unrevealed sadness, between its seeming inconsistency and its latent consistency. After the enumeration of variations of the gap between the surface and the depth, Douglass further dwells on the fact that slaves “sing most when they are most unhappy” (24). The most remarkable gap involved in his account of the slave songs, however, is the temporal one between experiencing and understanding. As a slave child, Douglass heard the slave songs, which refused to reveal their “deep meaning”; which never failed to affect the boy in a way that was hard to explain; which “followed” him, even up to the present time of writing when he is no longer “within the circle,” as if they were some persistent haunting

ghost; and which always reappears as a key to understanding slavery every time he gropes in his boyhood experience for a deeper meaning.<sup>36</sup>

The retroactive discovery of a “deep meaning” that is supposed to be always present from the outset, but which somehow eluded notice at the moment of perception, once again aligns Douglass’s *Narrative* with the Freudian primal fantasy, this time chiefly via the concept of *Nachträglichkeit* (commonly translated as “deferred action” in English). Freud points out that “the subject revises past events at a later date (*nachträglich*),” and that “it is this revision which invests them with significance and even with efficacy or pathogenic force” (Laplanche and Pontalis 112). First, there is an event that leaves its traces on the mind, and then, the subject revisits and reworks these traces to come to terms with the event. Fantasy emerges in the process of this reworking. Significantly, it is the aural, according to Freud, that plays a crucial part in the formation of fantasy. When he was striving to construct the basis of psychoanalytic theory in the late 1890s, Freud observed that “all three neuroses, hysteria, obsessional neurosis and paranoia, share the same elements.” First of all, argues Freud, the fantasies “stem from things that have been *heard* but understood *subsequently*.”<sup>37</sup> There is always a time-lag

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<sup>36</sup> In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass cites *verbatim* the entire paragraph that includes the above quoted passage (184-85), and in *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass* (1881; expanded in 1892), he quotes the first few sentences of the same passage (503). This self-quotation in both of his later autobiographies, in addition to the same phrase from the slave songs repeated in them (“I am going away to the Great House Farm . . .”), emphasizes the sense of the same thing “following” him unchanged, pointing to a kernel of his own narrated self whose intensity cannot be expressed except in repetition.

<sup>37</sup> Freud already noticed, one month earlier, the special role played by the aural specifically in hysteria: “hysterical fantasies . . . regularly . . . go back to things children overhear at an early age and understand only subsequently” (*Complete Letters* 234). Based on this insight, he attempted at a bold schematization that at once covered fantasies and dreams: “[fantasies] are related to things heard, as dreams are related to things seen. In dreams, to be sure, we hear nothing; but we see” (240).

between hearing and making sense of what was heard. Here again, the voice constitutes a kind of impenetrable kernel around which, at a later point of time, the fantasies are formed as “protective structures, sublimations of the facts, and embellishments of them,” that “at the same time serve the purpose of self-relief” (*Complete Letters* 239).

Freud’s explication of the temporal structure of *Nachträglichkeit* in terms of things heard but understood later illuminates the sense in which Douglass argues “I have sometimes thought that mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do” (24). For Douglass, just understanding slavery through reading is not enough; one must first experience its heinous character in spirit. Here Douglass shares with Freud a skepticism about reason’s ability to face up to a horrible reality, since the faculty of reason cannot be wholly severed from the mind’s self-protective function in which fantasy formation consists. In a way that anticipates Freud, Douglass is acutely aware of the primary role that the experience of hearing plays in recollection. Although what message it conveys is uncertain, the slave voice impresses on the slave boy’s mind a material trace which serves as a cornerstone of his memory such that without it his experience of slavery would appear entirely pointless. It must be emphasized, however, that by this remark Douglass is by no means saying to deepen our understanding of slavery through reading is meaningless, but he is surely suggesting that there is a more fundamental process involved in the experience of hearing the slave songs.

We can more clearly see how Douglass complicates his position by examining his comment that immediately follows: “[i]f any one wish to be impressed with the soul-killing effects of slavery, let him go to Colonel Lloyd’s plantation, and, on allowance-day,

place himself in the deep pine woods, and there let him, in silence, analyze the sounds that shall pass through the chambers of his soul” (24). Here Douglass presents a model of the subject that simultaneously draws on and diverges from the Cartesian tradition of *cogito ergo sum*. Like Nancy’s “resonant subject” I mentioned above, Douglass’s subject inextricably combines the process of analyzing with that of hearing, or rather collapses the two processes into the single process of reflection as reverberation, adhering to the primacy of sound throughout the process. What he calls the “soul” is *both* a working of intellectual faculties *and* a complex of empty chambers which transmits and enhances sounds coming from the external world. Rather than a self-sufficient system of the reflective ego, this model of the subject represents an open forum in which the I is penetrated by the voices of others.

Later, in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass clearly indicates the “double meaning” of one of the songs which he and five other slaves jubilantly sang as they were plotting an escape from slavery several years after the event discussed above: “In the lips of some, it meant the expectation of a speedy summons to a world of spirits; but in the lips of *our* company, it simply meant, a speedy pilgrimage toward a free state, and deliverance from all the evils and dangers of slavery” (*My Bondage* 308). Published as “Run to Jesus” in a book on the Jubilee Singers, the song, allegedly in Douglass’s own words, “first suggested to him the thought of escaping from slavery” (March 222). Yet, at the time of his first hearing slave songs on the Lloyd plantation, these songs intimated to the slave boy nothing more than the presence of a shared hidden meaning, or more precisely, a shared but not-put-into-words experience of the inhumanity of slavery, since not all slaves clearly recognized what the experience meant even as they all suffered from

it. This begs the question: how did the slave song transform for Douglass from something that simply expressed slave suffering and no more to a sonorous vehicle that conveyed the idea of freedom, which was far from self-evident? Despite the U.S. Declaration of Independence and other public proclamations that all men are born equally free, the idea had never come into the minds of the coconspirators in the runaway plot, or at least never occurred to their minds as a *viable* idea, until Douglass infused it into them. “Perhaps not one of them,” writes Douglass, “left to himself, would have dreamed of escape as a possible thing. Not one of them was self-moved in the matter. They all wanted to be free; but the serious thought of running away, had not entered into their minds, until I won them to the undertaking” (*My Bondage* 309). How did, then, the idea of freedom emerge in Douglass’s mind in the first place? I will show in what follows that freedom materialized in his mind first as a compelling yet ultimately elusive idea from which he was alienated, and later as an embodied idea of his own which found realization in the world, and that the medium of voice played a crucial role especially in the first stage where the idea had little material supports.

#### **DECEPTION, OVERHEARING, AND INITIATION TO LITERACY**

With his description of the slave songs and the subsequent presentation of the resonant subject, Douglass establishes in his *Narrative* a sonorous continuity beginning from Aunt Hester’s cries. By so doing, he trains our ears for all the gamut of sounds of slavery, including silence. Even in silence sounds can be heard as lingering after-effects, but silence itself can be heard as the minimum sonority once a sound has made a rupture in the silence, just as Hester’s shrieks that incised the dead silence of the early morning opened Douglass’s eyes to the truth of Southern slavery. As Lacan has put it, “[r]upture,

split, the stroke of the opening makes absence emerge—just as the cry does not stand out against a background of silence, but on the contrary makes the silence emerge as silence” (*Four Fundamental* 26). To the ears once attuned to the soundscape of slavery, even silence reveals itself as a deceptive sonority, as part of sounds that camouflage frauds perpetrated by slaveholders. As Douglass puts it in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, a “silent slave is not liked by masters or overseers. ‘*Make a noise,*’ ‘*make a noise*’ and ‘*bear a hand,*’ are the words usually addressed to the slaves when there is silence among them” (184). The slaveholders extorted sounds from the slaves to dissimulate a tense silence lest the latter’s muffled cries, whispers, and groans with which it was impregnated should be heard. On the other hand, just as slave songs were means the slaves employ to deceive slaveholders, their silence was no less deceptive. As Mark M. Smith has noted, “[t]he enslaved . . . used silence and quietude itself to resist” (*Sensing the Past* 51). This strategy was necessitated as a countermeasure against the slaveholders’ practice of sending in spies among their slaves to see if they show any sign of insubordination; “[t]he frequency of this,” observes Douglass, “has had the effect to establish among the slave the maxim: a still tongue makes a wise head” (27). In the world whose social fabric is every inch sustained by exploitations, frauds, and deceptions, nowhere, even where silence apparently dominates, is free of low-frequency clamors of the enslaved.

To the extent that deception characterized the relationship between slaves and slaveholders, it comes as no wonder that stealth was an equally predominating feature of that relationship. The stealing of the fruits not only of black labor but also of black culture was commonly approved and practiced, as minstrel performers’ appropriation of



black cultural forms exemplifies.<sup>38</sup> For the slaves' part, on the other hand, while they were openly denied access to such fruits of white civilization as literacy, they were able to covertly steal knowledge by means of overhearing among all else, thanks to the peculiar close proximity between the slaves and their master that characterized the domestic relations of the Southern slaveholder's household.<sup>39</sup> In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass recounts his first experience of stealing knowledge from the master. As a boy of six or seven, Douglass acutely perceived his master Aaron Anthony is "an unhappy man," observing Anthony "seldom walked alone without muttering to himself" and occasionally even "stormed about, as if defying an army of invisible foes." Catching unconscious words from the master's mouth led to recognizing the heart of darkness in which resided a "demon" that set the slaveholder "at war with his own soul, and with all the world around him."

To be overheard by the children, disturbed him very little. He made no more of our presence, than of that of the ducks and geese which he met on the green. He little thought that the little black urchins around him, could see, through those vocal crevices, the very secrets of his heart. Slaveholders ever underrate the intelligence with which they have to grapple. I really understood the old man's mutterings, attitudes and gestures, about as well as he did himself. But slaveholders never encourage that kind of communication, with the slaves, by which they might learn to measure the depths of his knowledge. Ignorance is a high virtue in a human chattel; and as the master studies to keep the slave ignorant, the slave is cunning enough to make the master think he succeeds. (172)

The experience of overhearing the master's unconscious mumblings initiated Douglass into "the very secrets of his heart." As with his experience with the slave songs, he does not detail what these secrets were, since what is at stake in this scene is not the master's

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<sup>38</sup> For a study of the "cultural theft" of blackface minstrelsy, see Lott, especially 3-62.

<sup>39</sup> This spatial proximity seems to be a contributing element to what Genovese has described as the "paternalistic" relationship between the slaveholders and the slaves: the masters viewed themselves as "authoritarian fathers who presided over an extended and subservient family, white and black" (74).

secrets themselves so much as the very fact that there was some dark truth that was deeply tormenting him beneath his seemingly unyielding, stern face and the slave boy had the ability to detect them. At this point, slavery did not yet exactly reveal its secrets to Douglass; he merely perceived the presence of something immensely momentous hidden behind the façade of slavery, which subsequently drove him on a further quest for the truth. Moreover, this experience trained him to intently listen to slaveholders' subdued voices, thus providing him with a warming-up exercise that led to his initiation to literacy.

Douglass's initial training in alphabets took place in 1826, when he was eight years old. This year, his master Aaron Anthony retired from his job as the chief overseer of Colonel Lloyd's estates, and Douglass was sent to Baltimore to live with Hugh Auld and his wife Sophia. Hugh Auld's brother, Thomas Auld, was married to Anthony's daughter Lucretia. In the Auld household, while serving as a companion to their two-year old son Tommy, Douglass asked Sophia to teach him to read, and she agreed on this request. With Sophia's assistance, Douglass learned the alphabets, and after that the spelling of monosyllabic words. However, Sophia's instruction suddenly stopped when her husband was informed of the fact. Douglass quotes Hugh's words of warning to his wife, which the slave boy overheard:

“If you give a nigger an inch, he will take an ell. A nigger should know nothing but to obey his master—to do as he is told to do. Learning would *spoil* the best nigger in the world. Now . . . if you teach that nigger . . . how to read, there would be no keeping him. It would forever unfit him to be a slave. He would at once become unmanageable, and of no value to his master. As to himself, it could do him no good, but a great deal of harm. It would make him discontented and unhappy.” (37)

Douglass comments on this wisdom uttered by the master,

These words sank deep into my heart, stirred up sentiments within that lay slumbering, and called into existence an entirely new train of thought. It was a new and special revelation, explaining dark and mysterious things, with which my youthful understanding had struggled, but struggled in vain. I now understood what had been to me a most perplexing difficulty—to wit, the white man’s power to enslave the black man. It was a grand achievement. . . . From that moment, I understood the pathway from slavery to freedom. It was just what I wanted, and I got it at a time when I the least expected it. . . . In learning to read, I owe almost as much to the bitter opposition of my master, as to the kindly aid of my mistress. (37-38)

Here Douglass for the first time perceived that black people were subordinated to whites not by a natural or divine necessity as slaveholders would tell them, but by the latter’s elaborate contrivances. This is why he observes the event opened “the pathway from slavery to freedom.” But it must be added that ‘freedom’ at this stage is not yet a positive concept which can be declared definitely. What he has discovered is rather at most the vague sense that ‘things can be otherwise,’ as long as the current state of matter is not preordained by any higher order. As Douglass would put it in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, “[i]t was not *color*, but *crime*, not *God*, but *man*, that afforded the true explanation of the existence of slavery,” and from this he boldly concludes that “what man can make, man can unmake” (179).<sup>40</sup> This new perspective on slavery implies the possibility that he also can be otherwise—which means to him nothing other than that he can be someone other than a slave—and in this possibility consists his burgeoning sense of freedom.

It is also worth observing that the above passage once again foregrounds the centrality of the voice in Douglass’s *Narrative*. The image of the words that sink deep into his heart juxtaposes, and thereby metonymically links the body and language in

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<sup>40</sup> In *My Bondage*, Douglass has come to this conclusion immediately after he witnessed the beating of Esther. Given his age, however, it seems more convincing to suppose the process of reasoning has taken a much longer time.

much a similar way as the gashes. This time, however, the emphasis is placed on the enduring materiality of the voice rather than on its presence as absence. These different facets of the voice staged in the two scenes are actually just the two sides of its same paradoxical status, insofar as it is located at the very intersection of the body and language. To the extent that the voice is a detachment of the body, a bodily missile that strikes the receiver, it has an indissoluble materiality. On the other hand, the voice has no perceptible physical force save as sound waves, and once the instant of utterance passes, the sound waves disappear, leaving no material remnant that evidences their existence a moment before, except for mental traces in the mind of the receiver. Moreover, the above scene further underscores the voice's materiality by indicating its remarkable independence from the sender. Douglass intercepted Hugh Auld's voice, which means that the voice arrived at a person not intended nor desired to receive it, thus effectively baffling the prescribed circuit of transmission. Douglass then interpreted the message conveyed by the voice in a way that ran radically against the grain of its intended purpose, and in so doing turned the master's wisdom into his own, a weapon with which to fight against slavery and to achieve freedom. The detachability of the voice, its free-floating quality, made it possible for him to receive the master's words in a manner unrestrained by the original intention of the speaker and to throw back to the master the same message loaded with a completely different meaning but with a rivaling weightiness. From this perspective, it is no accident that the voice plays a vital role in the drama of Douglass's life as a slave which is, as David Blight has put it, "full of antithesis and ironic reversals" ("Analyze the Sounds" 3).

## VOICE AND WRITING

The above curious episode concerning Douglass's initiation to writing illustrates how the growth of his literacy from an "inch" of training in reading and writing to an "ell" of fuller acquisition was mediated by sounds at its origin. If Mrs. Auld introduced Douglass to the alphabets, he developed that rudimentary knowledge by his own efforts—among all else by the exertion of his ears. His constant vigilance that made his aural organs particularly strained for further acquisition of knowledge proffered a fortuitous encounter with the spoken words that revealed the "pathway from slavery to freedom." If the mastery of literacy was the first step of Douglass's flight from slavery, the words stolen from the master were a key to that escape way.

It is important to stress, however, that this does not mean Douglass's account simply subjugates the written to the spoken word—in that case, the ex-slave author would be considered as fatally captive to the notorious metaphysical tradition of what Derrida has called "phonocentrism" (e.g. *Of Grammatology* 11): the assumption that the voice is the primary or "natural" element of language, whereas the written word is no more than a means to reproduce the spoken word; that writing is merely a supplement parasitically added to the original material of language, and at the same time it can be as dangerous in that it threatens to usurp the place of the original. Derrida's attack on phonocentrism is framed within his sweeping critique of the "metaphysics of presence": to hear oneself speak assures one of one's self-presence, and as the French verb *entendre* (meaning both 'to hear' and 'to understand') indicates, out of this experience of self-presence arises the

subject of consciousness.<sup>41</sup> In reading Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, Derrida argues,

[speech's] system requires that it be heard and understood immediately by whoever emits it. It produces a signifier which seems not to fall into the world, outside the ideality of the signified, but to remain sheltered—even at the moment that it attains the audiophonic system of the other—within the pure interiority of auto-affection. It does not fall into the exteriority of space, into what one calls the world, which is nothing but the outside of speech. Within so-called “living” speech, the spatial exteriority of the signifier seems absolutely reduced. . . . Speech and the consciousness of speech—that is to say consciousness simply as self-presence—are the phenomenon of an auto-affection lived as suppression of difference. That *phenomenon*, that presumed suppression of difference, that lived reduction of the opacity of the signifier, are the origin of what is called *presence*. (*Of Grammatology* 166)

But does the voice really *always* and *by necessity* guarantee self-presence, the “pure interiority of auto-affection,” which closes itself from the world of the other, even as, or perhaps precisely because, it establishes the “audiophonic system of the other,” as Derrida seems to lead us to believe? Provided that *hearing* is first and foremost *hearing oneself*, does that without qualification preclude the possibility that the one who hears is dislocated or spaced from within, that the voice, instead of completing the process of subjectification in which consciousness becomes fully present to itself, rather opens the circuit of subjectivity to the Derridean *différance*?<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> “From Descartes to Hegel and in spite of all the differences . . . God's infinite understanding is the other name for the logos as self-presence. The logos can be infinite and self-present, it can be *produced as auto-affection*, only through the *voice*: an order of the signifier by which the subject takes from itself into itself, does not borrow outside of itself the signifier that it emits and that affects it at the same time. Such is at least the experience—or consciousness—of the voice: of hearing (understanding)-oneself-speak [*s'entendre-parler*].” (*Of Grammatology* 98)

<sup>42</sup> See Žižek, *The Indivisible Remainder* 99-103. As Jean-Luc Nancy points out, by the dynamic of *différance*, Derrida designates “the infinite motion of finite being as such,” and therefore, *différance* “implies freedom, or is implied by it. Freedom frees *différance*, while *différance* defers freedom. . .” (*The Experience of Freedom* 186n8). Thus what is

The issue of voice in Douglass's text should be addressed without precluding such possibilities. To be sure, Douglass is not wholly innocent of the blame of auto-affection or autoeroticism—that is probably at least one underlying reason why Douglass's account of the whipping of Esther has drawn disapprovals from feminist critics, as we have already seen. Yet, if as Derrida himself acknowledges, “[a]uto-affection is a universal structure of experience” (*Of Grammatology* 165), what is to be asked is rather how and to what extent Douglass was entrapped in that universal structure (or perhaps more properly speaking, how and to what extent his text eluded, disrupted, and even “deconstructed” it). It is worth recalling here that Esther's cries claim such a forceful presence in the *Narrative* that it obstructs their smooth translation, without excess, into the economy of the male voyeuristic fantasy. Douglass retains the sonorous remains of the suffering body as they are ringing and lingering on his text, thus keeping alive the disruptive edge of the voice that floats at the thresholds of signification—of “that which one has always excluded, pushing it to the area of animality or of madness, like the myth of the inarticulate cry” (Derrida, *Of Grammatology* 166). This haunting sonority finds vent, transfigured, in the missiles of blood which coming out of the blue, or rather out of the dim gray twilight of visual perception, assail Douglass's autoerotic fantasy as an ultra-ocular object that expresses the sheer force of the Other that struck him. The extent to which this objectified image of blood itself feeds into, and thus ultimately bolsters, the economy of the scopophilic fantasy—in other words, this surplus object that insists on its own excess over what it signifies turns into a fetish object, a fixated object of enjoyment—remains to be questioned, but at least, as I have shown, Douglass refuses to

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ultimately at stake here is how the voice can open subjectivity to the experience of freedom.

stop the flow of sonority at the point of Esther's cries; rather he is at pains to leave it open to other voices and sounds to come. The continuum of sonority resurges with his recitation of the slave songs; relayed by the image of the gashes that open the mouth wide against the pen, returns as the reversible edge of vocality that strikes back the original utterer of the words; and in the process opens the passageway to literacy and beckons the possibility of freedom.

Writing enters the stage precisely at this point as an indispensable agent that draws this itinerant sonic force onto a higher horizon in the drama of its wanderings and transformations. It is important to note that writing is not a rival to sonority, nor does it have complete control over it. Without writing, sonority could not proceed further in its quest for expression, and yet writing is not in the position to fully take over its role either. To put it a different way, writing essentially remains what Vladimir Propp terms a "donor" in his taxonomy of characters and functions in folktales—one who the hero encounters in the dark forest in which he is lost and who provides an assistance that allows him to proceed (39). It also should be pointed out, on the other hand—and here our theatrical metaphor falters—that the force of sonority is not consubstantial with the sonority that expresses it. In other words, this drama of sonic force is one that revolves around an absent center. And if it has a protagonist, that protagonist is like an invisible knight on horseback whose whereabouts is to be surmised approximately, and not always exactly, on the basis of the presence of the visible (or audible) horse.<sup>43</sup> A surplus accrues

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<sup>43</sup> We may compare this drama of sonority where only its 'horse' is an object of perception with what Hegel calls the "mediating play of Forces," in which a being is mediated by an appearance, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*: "This *being* of this object [*i.e.*, Force] for consciousness is mediated by the movement of *appearance*, in which the *being of perception* and the sensuously objective in general has a merely negative



in the very interval between the written and the spoken word, just as the striking force of the image of the pen in the gashes resides, properly speaking, neither in Douglass's feet cracked with the frost nor in the writing tool he was holding, but rather it comes out as a grating sound made in the unexpected, painful contiguity of two discordant elements, produced at the boundary surface of the opening of his body that is precisely kept unclosed by the pen grazing on it. Douglass climbs the ladder of literacy in the back-and-forth movement between reading/writing and hearing/speaking. At first, the voice issuing from the master that interdicts further progression seems to halt this ascent. Seconds later, however, Douglass successfully makes an upward step using the uncontainable edge (a surplus) of the master's words as an invisible purchase with which he reverses the whole state of affairs, turning the impediment into an asset. To put it another way, he attains literacy in a dialectical manner—I use “dialectical” not to say that the last stage of the development, the full mastery of writing, encompasses all the preceding steps that lead to it, but to emphasize that the written and the spoken word remain separate categories, even as they are mediated by each other, in this process—and a surplus is the hidden agent of mediation. Thus the *Narrative* has two protagonists: an obvious one, Frederick Douglass, and latently, a surplus (of the voice), first prominently introduced on the wings of Esther's cries; it recurs at key moments to play the part of a veiled principal. The appearance of this primary mediator is typically announced by some sonority; and yet, Douglass refuses to crown a particular sound object with the agency fully responsible for mediation, since in that case, the object will sink to the dead ground of fetishism, thwarting further accrual of surplus force in the same function as a vanishing mediator,

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significance” (87). I will come back to Hegel's “play of Forces” later in my examination of Douglass's “flash of freedom” in terms of Kant's “voice of reason.”

though in a different guise, in later stages. In this way, Douglass's description of the dialectical development into literacy prohibits the privileging of either the written or the spoken word, illustrating what is secretly at stake in his enterprise of recounting his long journey in pursuit of freedom.

### ***THE COLUMBIAN ORATOR***

If overhearing is a crucial element in his introduction to literacy, the same element continues to play a part of equal importance in his first encounter with a definite idea of liberty. At age twelve, Douglass came upon a book that, according to a Douglass biographer, would "exert a profound influence on his life and thinking" (Preston 96). *The Columbian Orator*, came to Douglass's notice when, as he makes clear in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, he overheard "some little boys say that they are going to learn some little pieces out of it for the Exhibition" (225). After Lucretia Auld's refusal to continue to teach him to read, Douglass found teachers in the poor white children in the neighborhood, who were ready to give what he sought in exchange for bread he made a habit of carrying around with him. His experience with these white children convinced him that he was not inferior to them in any way except in the "right to be free" (41), so that upon knowing that his white friends were assigned to memorize and recite passages from *The Columbian Orator* for a school exercise, he bought the book for himself in emulation.

The figure of voice is a central trope in this episode about Douglass's reading of *The Columbian Orator*, which further illustrates how the written and the spoken word are interconnected in his initiation to literacy. First, as I mentioned above, overhearing (in this case overhearing words spoken by white boys) is for the second time a means to

break the interdiction imposed on him against further learning. Second, the book itself is aimed at enhancement of speaking skills through reading. *The Columbian Orator* is a collection of miscellaneous essays, poems, speeches, dialogues, and others, compiled in 1797 by Caleb Bingham. It is a sequel to Bingham's *The American Preceptor; Being a New Selection of Lessons for Reading and Speaking. Designed for the Use of Schools* (1794), and like the first book, prescribes rules particularly designed to "Improve Youth and Others in the Ornamental and Useful Art of Eloquence," as its subtitle has it. The book's preoccupation with the art of eloquence is by no means unusual; rather it accurately reflects the trends of the day. *The Columbian Orator* was among numerous publications spawned in the fermentation of a late eighteenth-century trans-Atlantic cultural phenomenon that Jay Fliegelman calls the "Elocutionary Revolution"—a revolution that "sought to replace artificial language with natural language and to make writing over in the image of speaking" (28, 24). As the "General Instructions for Speaking—Extracted from Various Authors" that prefaces the book has it, "the perfection of art consists in its nearest resemblance to nature" (7).<sup>44</sup> Advocating ground rules like this, *The Columbian Orator* undeniably espouses ideological tenets deeply inflected by the metaphysics of "phonocentrism" prevailing in the "age of Rousseau,"<sup>45</sup> and to that

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<sup>44</sup> Although Bingham did not make clear from which authors he extracted the passages, almost all the "General Instructions" can be found *verbatim* in John Ward's *A System of Oratory, Delivered in a Course of Lectures Publicly Read at Gresham College, London . . .*, Vol. 2 (1759). See, in particular, Lecture XLVII. Of Pronunciation in general; XLVII. Of the Voice; XLIX. Of Gesture; and L. Some Particular Rules for the Voice and Gesture. Ward originally gave the lectures in 1720.

<sup>45</sup> Rousseau paradigmatically articulates this ideology, for instance, when he mentions in *Émile, or On Education* (1762) that the "art of speaking to and hearing from absent people, the art of communicating our feelings, our wills, our desires to them at a distance without a mediator is an art whose utility can be rendered palpable to all ages" (253). I

extent, the Derridean criticism is quite pertinent. It should be also pointed out, however, that the Elocutionary Revolution redefined the nature of reading in such a way that simple separation of reading from speaking was no longer tenable. The experience of reading was reconceived from inside out in light of the model of speaking, so that it was permanently inhabited by the figure of voice. One remarkable symptom of this historical shift was the deluge of epistolary novels beginning with Samuel Richardson's immensely popular *Pamela* (1740) and *Clarissa* (1749).<sup>46</sup> The slave narrative, as a genre, is also a response to this phenomenon—the ex-slave narrator's "artless" voice perfectly accords with a writerly ideal of the age.<sup>47</sup> Douglass's *Narrative* attains an exemplary status precisely because the voice of the celebrated public orator, who is lauded for his "pathos, wit, comparison, imitation, strength of reasoning, and fluency of language" and credited with a "union of head and heart" by William Lloyd Garrison (in his preface to the *Narrative* 3), is heard through his text—or rather the text quite effectively creates such an illusion. By the time when James M'Cune Smith in his introduction to *My Bondage and My Freedom* cites the narrator's sophisticated style in writing as well as in speaking as the "most remarkable mental phenomenon in Mr. Douglass," and puzzles at "that rare polish in his style of writing, which, most critically examined, seems the result of careful early culture among the best classics of our language" (135), it is beginning to dawn on

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have drawn the phrase "age of Rousseau" from the title of the introduction to Part II of Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (97-100).

<sup>46</sup> As Fliegelman argues, the "fiction of fiction was that novels (told in letters, or through an engaging narrator's voice, or by transcribed dialogue) were not books, as books had been traditionally experienced" (58-59).

<sup>47</sup> The phrase "artless" was used to describe Olaudah Equiano, Douglass's great precursor in the tradition of ex-slave narrators, by an early reviewer (Fliegelman 59). See also Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s analysis of "the trope of the Talking Book" (*The Signifying Monkey* 127-69).

perceptive readers that Douglass's writing is more than a mere replication of his speaking. It is perhaps rather that "polish," the ability to refine language up to the standard of written sentences, that makes him excel in oratory. The illusion of the voice speaking through the text, of the unified presence of head and heart, is not to be attributed to his oratory skills alone. Rather, the ultimate direction of Douglass's linguistic training, whether in writing or in speaking, is from the outset oriented toward creating such an illusion, above all else by his early schooling in *The Columbian Orator*, a textbook that tentatively, but productively for Douglass, inculcates its readers with principles that presuppose a fundamental proximity of reading and speaking.

In describing the process of learning from *The Columbian Orator*, Douglass makes recourse to the figure of voice in a fashion worth close examination. Repeatedly reading the pieces included in the volume, especially the patriotic speeches by such American Revolutionary heroes as Washington, as well as by Cato, William Pitt the Elder, Charles James Fox, Napoleon, and other prominent figures, Douglass imbibed "such intoxicating words as *freedom*, *liberty*, and *hatred of tyranny*" (Preston 98).<sup>48</sup> In Douglass's own words, these pieces "gave tongue to interesting thoughts of my own soul, which had frequently flashed through my mind, and died away for want of utterance" (42). *The Columbian Orator* gives voice to what would have otherwise remained transient and nebulous in Douglass's mind. The idea of freedom newly found through his reading the book enabled him to make a conceptual link in a realm that had so far resisted linguistic expression and to discover retroactively a meaning in something that had merely flown

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<sup>48</sup> For *The Columbian Orator*'s influence on Douglass, see also David W. Blight's Introduction to the reprinted edition of the book.

away like a flash, just as he discovered in retrospect some hidden messages loaded in the slave songs he had heard in his boyhood.

Here the two scenes of retroactive discovery deserve a brief comparison with each other. Both the episode of the slave songs and that of *The Columbian Orator*, in essence, tell a story of *Nachträglichkeit* that centers on the figure of voice. There is, however, a significant difference between the roles the figure plays in the two scenes. In the case of the slave songs, the voice constitutes the very beginning that at once defies and invites understanding. In the episode with *The Columbian Orator*, on the other hand, the voice is precisely the agent that enables Douglass to understand. Even so, if we take both scenes together into consideration, what matters is not whether the voice comes before or simultaneously with understanding so much as the fact that the voice is a central figure that animates the whole dynamics of each scene.<sup>49</sup> The voice can appear either as a cause or as a means, but either way, it makes a rupture, a difference, where it has never been imagined that there is no such difference.

The concrete materialization of his ideas that would otherwise have evaporated like a mist, but which took a definite shape with the aid of *The Columbian Orator*, marked a different, significant stage in Douglass's development as a slave seeking freedom. It is important to note how Douglass employs voice-related expressions such as "give tongue" and "utterance" in describing this breakthrough. They are more than figures of speech, in that Douglass for the first time found a way to literally "utter" his so-far hazy thoughts in words with his own "tongue" as a result of reading the book. To this extent, Douglass's

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<sup>49</sup> If, for Freud, the proper place of the voice in the primal fantasy is the beginning, it is also not far removed from Freud's point to argue that the same figure of the voice can readily change places in various scenarios of deferred action.

acquisition of literacy constituted more than one of his regular steps forward towards freedom. The event carries the sense of a sudden leap that exceeds the bounds of the ordinary. Douglass identifies this stage of his growth as a turning point because it miraculously bridged the gaping conceptual gaps between the literal and the metaphorical (the book literally gave voice to his thoughts), between doing and saying (to acquire the ability to voice his ideas was nothing less than a great step towards his liberty in reality), and between speaking and reading (reading the book directly translated into speaking his ideas). In this sense, his learning to express his thoughts by reading *The Columbian Orator* is an almost mythical, if undeniably real, (or rather, precisely because it is real) moment of his life, in which the book's problematic promise to abolish the divide between the written and the spoken word was temporarily fulfilled.

Among all the pieces included in *The Columbian Orator*, Douglass was in particular impressed by what he calls "Sheridan's mighty speeches on and in behalf of Catholic emancipation" (42). The speech in question is actually Arthur O'Conner's, presented in the Irish House of Commons in 1795. Although *The Columbian Orator* also reprints the speech made in the British House of Commons in 1785 by the playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan, also of Irish origin, the speech is not outright on Catholic Emancipation, and more importantly, there is no mention of liberty or freedom in it. This error, or at least inaccuracy on Douglass's part, however, might have been intentional, since he did not emend it in either of his later autobiographies, even though he added a few names on his list of significant influences from *The Columbian Orator* (226, 533). One possible explanation for Douglass's persistent citation of Sheridan's name might be that as a young man the British playwright, like Douglass, survived deadly duels against

his rival. Through some grapevine, Douglass might have known this famous anecdote, and his episode might have remained in his mind to resonate faintly with the memory of his own decisive fight with Covey.

Another piece that profoundly inspires Douglass is the “dialogue between a master and his slave” (41). The dialogue is an excerpt from the British doctor John Aikin and his sister poet Anna Laetitia Barbauld’s six-volume collection of children’s stories, *Evenings at Home* (1792-96). It represents the words exchanged between a master and his slave, when the slave, who has attempted a second escape, is captured and taken before the master.<sup>50</sup> Douglass explains what he finds especially fascinating about the dialogue:

In this dialogue, the whole argument in behalf of slavery was brought forward by the master, all of which was disposed of by the slave. The slave was made to say some very smart as well as impressive things in reply to his master—things which had the desired though unexpected effect; for the conversation resulted in the voluntary emancipation of the slave on the part of the master. (41-42)

The dialogue recapitulates a few key motifs of the *Narrative*. Words that have an unexpected effect made marked appearance in Douglass’s overhearing of Hugh Auld’s advice to his sister, even though in the preceding case the one who uttered words was a master, and the resulting effect was by no means desirable for the speaker. More significantly, the dialogue foreshadows Douglass’s future fight against the slave breaker Covey, presenting a confrontation between the slave and the master in the disguise of exchange of words, not blows. The dialogue provides a model on which Douglass works out his own dialectic of master and slave. In the dialogue the whole argument is opened by the master, just as it is Covey (at least according to Douglass’s account) who makes

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<sup>50</sup> Douglass states “the slave was retaken the third time” (41). This is somehow not faithful to the original, in which the slave was captured in his “second attempt to run away” (209).



the whole cause for his resistance. Then the slave's replies to his master one by one entwines the master deeper and deeper in the slave's logic and draws the master eventually to agree to manumit the slave, just as each of Douglass's counteractions against Covey's attempted blows puts the slave breaker more firmly under the slave's control and leads the breaker to acquiesce in the slave's virtual freedom, if not in his legal emancipation. Of course, even if he doesn't read the dialogue, Douglass might have dealt a counterblow against Covey in desperate defense, but without the fictional precedent of a slave defeating his master in a legitimate way, there would have been no justification for his persisting in resistance nor any interpretive framework in which he can duly claim the justice of his act of resistance in his autobiographies.

It should be also worth stressing that the dialogue paved the way for the coming battle with Covey with its figuration of an irresistible force at work in the exchange. Douglass attributes the slave's winning freedom from the master to "the power of truth over the conscience of even a slaveholder" (42). There is no due reason, however, for him to assume the existence of such a power in truth because if there was, slavery did not exist in the first place. The dialogue implies, indeed, that the exchange between the master and the slave "as man to man" could not have taken place if the master did not "condescend to talk" with the slave (*Columbian Orator* 210). The situation seems quite exceptional, since slaveholders were legally entitled to punish or sell to the Deep South a slave without argument, or even without seeing the slave. Although the power of truth is the prime motor that brings victory to the slave at the end of the dialogue, it is equally undeniable that truth can exercise its power only when the master pays due regard to it. Despite this, the dialogue hypothetically stages the exchange and shows its possible

consequences, and Douglass sees a possibility of freedom in this setting. It can be argued, then, that what captures Douglass's mind is not the power of *truth per se* so much as the *power* of truth, the driving force behind truth that moves the master to consent to the slave's demand. Apparently, Douglass is not troubled by the doubt that there might be some discrepancy between truth and power, wholeheartedly accepting the simple and seemingly self-evident assumption that power will somehow automatically emanate from truth. It must be pointed out, however, that the central focus of the textbook is the art of eloquence, and that this art mainly concerns how the speaker can influence the audience with the force of his words.

An episode of Cicero in the introductory "General Instructions for Speaking"<sup>51</sup> illustrates this point. Cicero gives an oration before Cesar on behalf of his friend Ligarius, who has incurred the Roman ruler's enmity. In the course of his oration, Cicero speaks about the Battle of Pharsalus, which Cesar has won to become the dictator of Rome, "in such a moving and lively manner, that Cesar could no longer contain himself, but was thrown into such a fit of shivering, that he dropped the papers which he held in his hand." In spite of his familiarity with "the arts of address, and avenues to the passions" as an equally expert orator of the age, "neither his skill, nor resolution of mind, was of sufficient force against the power of oratory; but the conqueror of the world became a conquest to the charms of Cicero's eloquence; so that, contrary to his intentions, he pardoned Ligarius" (7). Pages later, the "General Instructions" cites another remarkable speech from the golden age of oratory. The oration was delivered by the tribune Gaius Gracchus to raise the populace against their governors. When the speech touched on the

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<sup>51</sup> This introduction was Bingham's almost word-to-word adaptation of the English rhetorician John Ward's *A System of Oratory* (1759). See note 43 above.

death of his older brother Tiberius who, like Gaius himself, had been at strife with the Senate and consequently killed, the tribune “expressed himself in such moving accents and gestures, that he extorted tears even from his enemies” (22).

These episodes leave us wonder what the nature of this “power of oratory,” which coerces even an unsympathetic listener to act contrary to his intentions and wrings tears from him, is. Is the force the art of eloquence exercises over the audience the same as the “power of truth” that Douglass has seen in the dialogue? The author of the “General Instructions” responds to such a question by making recourse to the Aristotelian standard of art: “the perfection of art consists in its nearest resemblance to nature.” It soon becomes clear, however, that this simple proposition needs clarification with the help of Cicero. A mere imitation of nature will not elevate the art of eloquence to its perfection. The author quotes Cicero’s observation: “It is certain that truth (by which he means nature) in everything, excels imitation; but if that were sufficient of itself in action, we should have no occasion for art” (7; parenthetical remark original). With the authority of the master of oratory on his side (“who was ever a better judge?”), the author now confidently concludes that “art, in this case . . . if well managed, will assist and improve nature” (7). Art is not merely an aping vassal to nature, but it’s rather a crucial agent that helps raise nature to its perfection. Yet, this conclusion stirs a whiff of doubt as to whether it may compromise the very premise of the whole argument (truth as the ultimate ground of art), since, as he puts it, “sometimes we find the force of it so great and powerful, that, where it is wholly counterfeit, it will for the time work the same effect as if it were founded in truth” (7). How then, can we tell the difference between truthful and counterfeit representations? Not addressing a question like this, the author asks himself,

in mock amazement, “how powerful must be the effect of a just and lively representation of what we know to be true,” if what is “supported by fancy and imagination only” can so forcefully touch us (8). As a result, even while he makes the point that “the action of an orator was very different from that of the theatre,” the author fails to distinguish the “surprising effects of eloquence” from the captivating spells that refined theatrical representations cast over the audience (8-9). Ultimately, the true weight of the whole argument of the “General Instructions” is placed on the power of oratory itself rather than on truth, its alleged wellspring. The author invokes the authority of truth as the essential foundation of art only to reaffirm art’s potentially unruly power to move people that can subvert the claim for truthfulness. *The Columbian Orator* arose out of a cultural tradition that precariously embraced the art of oratory, and Douglass imbibed that heritage through his immersion in the guidebook. Douglass’s invocation of the “power of truth” in his reading of the dialogue between the master and the slave cannot be entirely cleansed of a shadow of the dubious force of coercion that haunts the art of eloquence.

Last but not least, it is worth noting that Douglass modeled his exchange of blows with Covey on the exchange of words in the dialogue in such a way that these scenes of reciprocation were so closely entangled with each other in the *Narrative* that the later fight retroactively determined the essence of the foregoing dialogue. The dialogue trained Douglass for the turning point of his life by simulating a situation in which the slave won the game against the master with the compelling force of his eloquence. Douglass constructed his own tactics to fight against the master on the basis of the formal dynamics at work in the dialogue above all else. But it can be argued that Douglass misapplied the tactics to the fight, since the fight was by no means a dialogue. Nevertheless, the dialogue

anticipated a crucial aspect of the battle: as Douglass comments on the slave character's final victory in the dialogue, it brought forth a "desired though unexpected effect" for the bondman. This is exactly what comes to the fore when Douglass put into practice what he learned from the dialogue in his fight with the slave breaker; he unexpectedly discovers he is far freer than he believed. But before discussing the fight in question, I will further examine how Douglass came to terms with the idea of freedom in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE LAW OF FREEDOM

As we saw in the previous chapter, Douglass typically employed the figure of voice to represent a force or surplus that eluded the definite grasp of representation: the irresistible appeal of Esther's cries or the songs the other slaves sang which left on his mind permanent traces that stubbornly resisted understanding, but that revealed their meanings only in retrospective examination; the repeated scenes of overhearing in which he fortuitously came across a voice whereby he changed the stream of events to his advantage; the exchange of words between the master and the slave in which the latter's shrewd argument persuaded the former to manumit him with a force almost inexplicably compelling like that of fists. These episodes indicate how closely coupled Douglass's preoccupation with the voice was with his investigation into a force behind it which would of necessity lead him down the path to freedom in spite of all the adverse circumstances of slavery. Each time he presented the voice as a vital agent that opened a new horizon for him, Douglass detected something that dictated the necessity of his liberty. The voice was the most powerful material conveyer of his not yet full-fledged sense of freedom.

In this chapter, I will show how Douglass developed what he had learned through listening to voices and reading the *Columbian Orator* into a definite idea of his own freedom. Through a gradual process, he incorporated the idea of freedom as essential part of his own self. It is worth mentioning at this point that Douglass did not seek the foundation of his idea of freedom in an order outside himself as other pious slaves did. As we shall see later, he held a deep sense of scorn toward those religious slaves who

adhered to the idea that their masters indoctrinated them with, *i.e.*, the belief that God would reward them in the next world for the torments they suffered in this world if they behaved themselves. In his quest for liberty, by contrast, Douglass never abandoned the idea of freedom as immanent in this world and accordingly took pains to elaborate freedom as an inner necessity. An incident that took place during his service at Covey's will illustrate this point.

### **THE FLASH OF FREEDOM**

Douglass began working as a field hand for Edward Covey on the first day of January in 1834,<sup>52</sup> when he was nearly sixteen years old. In March of the previous year, he was sent from Baltimore to St. Michaels to live with Thomas Auld,<sup>53</sup> but the master soon saw Douglass's rebelliousness and decided to rent him out to Covey for one year for the purpose of, as Auld expressly announced to his slave, "breaking" him (*Narrative* 54). Auld was especially cautioned by Douglass's attempts to help organize and teach reading in a Sunday school for blacks, and he and other local whites broke the meeting "with sticks and other missiles," when Douglass and his fellow blacks gathered for the third time (53).<sup>54</sup> By this point, Douglass's vocabulary concerning freedom and slave resistance sufficiently expanded, in particular with his overhearing and subsequent

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<sup>52</sup> Douglass erroneously stated in the *Narrative* that he began working on Covey's farm on January 1, 1833 (54). All the events from his arrival at Thomas Auld's house in March, 1833 to his return to Baltimore in 1836 were incorrectly dated a year earlier in the *Narrative*, and he amended them in his later autobiographies. It is also important to bear in mind that the date January 1<sup>st</sup> has a symbolic meaning—it anticipates Douglass's rebirth that will take place as a result of his fight with Covey.

<sup>53</sup> The legal ownership of Douglass came into the hands of Thomas Auld in 1827, as a result of the death of Auld's first wife Lucretia, who shortly followed her father Aaron Anthony, Douglass's first master, to sleep in the previous year.

<sup>54</sup> According to Douglass's later autobiographies, the meeting was held only two times, not three (254).

painstaking learning from city papers of the portentous words *abolition* and *abolitionist* (43), for him to teach other slaves a number of things that should pose a grave threat to the social institution of slavery.

Auld's scheme to break Douglass by sending him to Covey at first came off perfectly as planned. Covey proved the severest trial that Douglass had to endure: "If at any one time of my life more than another, I was made to drink the bitterest dregs of slavery, that time was during the first six months of my stay with Mr. Covey." At this point, Douglass had to acknowledge his defeat *vis-à-vis* Covey's supreme competence as slave breaker: "Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed, the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold a man transformed into a brute!" (58).

Even in the state of "beast-like stupor," however, Douglass had occasional moments of sudden awareness, in which "a flash of energetic freedom would dart through my soul, accompanied with a faint beam of hope, that flickered for a moment, and then vanished" (58). This figuration of the consciousness of freedom as a flash fantasmatically appearing out of the blue to him marked Douglass as an undeniably modern thinker, one partaking in the horizon of thought which postulated freedom as an unquestionable inner reality. This horizon was widely shared by many of Douglass's contemporaries. In the 1830s United States, the Transcendentalists were fervently talking about the Quaker's fundamental principle of absolute trust in the Inner Light. Ralph Waldo Emerson, for instance, approvingly observed in a lecture on George Fox that the inner light was "an infallible guidance . . . by which he [Fox] understood nothing that was peculiar to himself



but a leading that was tendered to every man who yielded himself to it” (qtd. in Richardson 162). Douglass’s “flash of freedom” is to be less closely associated with the original Quaker belief in the inner light than with the Transcendentalists’ revision of it, since for the Transcendentalists, the principle was not merely a religious doctrine (which Douglass could not wholeheartedly embrace in whatever words it was couched), but rather, as Emerson puts it, “the most republican principle” that animated “perhaps all political revolutions founded on claims of Rights,” a secular expression of “the deep emotion that can agitate a community of unthinking men, when a truth familiar in words, that ‘God is within us,’ is made for a time a conviction” (qtd. in Richardson 162-63). It is important to note, however, that unlike the Transcendentalists, the slave boy never knew such cultured words as Right—all he was aware of was the concept of freedom in its most elementary form, a flitting contact with the idea of freedom as it emitted its “energetic” force. With only the minimum vocabulary with which to express the idea of freedom, Douglass had to deal with the task of how to describe freedom as his own inner truth, not as something borrowed from others, and under the pressure of this narrative conundrum, he explored the figurative limits of the idea. It should be pertinent, then, to examine Douglass’s figuration of the emergent concept of freedom in light of the greatest theoretical inspiration for the American Transcendentalists, that is, Immanuel Kant, who proposed the most sophisticated conception of freedom as law and thereby laid a philosophical groundwork which the subsequent generations of thinkers of freedom could not avoid.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Frederick Henry Hedge, whom Mary Moody Emerson called the “Moses” of the Transcendentalist movement, published in 1833 an article entitled “Coleridge’s Literary Character,” in which he attempted what he later described as a “vindication of German

## THE KANTIAN FIGURATION OF THE LAW OF FREEDOM: THE STARRY HEAVENS

Kant's theorization of the idea of freedom as the law of freedom (which is one with the moral law) is most comprehensively presented in the *Critique of Practical Reason* (1788), the second of his three *Critiques* that elaborated his philosophical system. Kant argues at the outset of the book that "freedom is real, for this idea reveals itself through the moral law" (3). For Kant, the objective reality of the moral law, which discloses the reality of the concept of freedom, "cannot be proved by any deduction, by any efforts of theoretical reason, speculative or empirically supported, so that, even if one were willing to renounce its apodictic certainty, it could not be confirmed by experience and thus proved a posteriori; and it is nevertheless firmly established of itself" (42). Neither the moral law nor the accompanying idea of freedom can be deductively proved from some other speculative or empirical premises; they are just there, their factuality irrefutable beyond all doubt.

As a result, Kant famously compares, in the concluding section of the *Critique*, "the moral law within me" to "the starry heavens above me," basing the ground of this comparison on the fact that they both "fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and reverence, the more often and more steadily one reflects on them." The source of our admiration for the starry heavens is, argues Kant, their bare factuality faced with which we immediately intuit the lawfulness of the world outside which mirrors the

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metaphysics" and defended Kantian philosophy in particular (Buell 23). In the article, Hedge argues that "[t]he method [of Kantian philosophy] is synthetic, proceeding from a given point, the lowest that can be found in our consciousness, and deducing from that point 'the whole world of intelligences, with the whole system of their representations.' . . . The last step in the process . . . is . . . the establishing of a coincidence between the facts of ordinary experience and those which we have discovered within ourselves" (70-71). For the Transcendentalists, the inner light represented that synthetic point of convergence between external and internal reality.

moral law within us: “I do not need to search for them and merely conjecture them as though they were veiled in obscurity or in the transcendent region beyond my horizon; I see them before me and connect them immediately with the consciousness of my existence” (133). Just as the constellations in the nightly sky are indisputably there above us and revealing to us the existence of a supreme law, so we find in ourselves the highest law whose reality cannot be called into question. With its incontestable factuality, the starry sky demonstrates our essential connection with the infinite—“the connection in which I stand into an unbounded magnitude with the worlds upon worlds and systems of systems, and moreover into the unbounded times to their periodic motion, their beginning and their duration”—and thus illuminates the presence in us of “a world which has true infinity but which can be discovered only by the understanding” (133). Although this “true infinity” itself cannot be represented, the luminous stars in the night sky bring to light the infinite order of the sovereign moral law that governs us.

To see how relevant Kant’s comparison of the moral law with the starry heavens is to my argument, it is worth pointing out the prominent role the night sky played in the American slave experience: fugitive slaves travelled primarily during the night for fear of detection, and in order not to get lost in the dark woods, they always tried to keep the North Star in view and made their way toward its direction. Losing sight of the North Star involved the actual risk of losing the sight of freedom itself. In this sense, the North Star was for the slaves not just a symbol of freedom but its material embodiment, without which it would have been unimaginably harder to realize liberty. Thus, when pondering on an escape plot which he hatched with other slaves in 1836, Douglass contrasts the real difficulties that would stand in their way with the tenuous prospect of freedom only

illuminated by the distant sight of the North Star: on the one hand, “there stood slavery, a stern reality, glaring frightfully upon us”; on the other hand, “away back in the dim distance, under the flickering light of the north star, behind some craggy hill or snow-covered mountain, stood a doubtful freedom—half frozen—beckoning us to come and share its hospitality” (*Narrative* 73-74). By drawing this contrast, Douglass weighs the overwhelming reality of Southern slavery against the idea of freedom that was rendered palpable only by the North Star. The powerfulness of the spell this material token of freedom cast over the plotters can be measured by the fact that despite the faint hope of freedom, they made up their minds to “follow the guidance of the north star” (74). Although the escape plan was disclosed in the last minute before its execution, Douglass’s account suggests how central the North Star was to the slaves’ conceptualization of freedom. The North Star objectified the idea of freedom for the slaves who had no other way to envision it, and thereby emboldened them to carry on their quest for liberty. Loaded with a solid materiality by the North Star, the idea became a conceptual weapon with which the slaves could challenge the seemingly unchangeable reality of slavery. From this perspective, it is no wonder that more than ten years later, Douglass made a public acknowledgment of the pivotal role the North Star played in his life as well as in a myriad of slave lives by naming his own newspaper after it.

While American slaves typically saw a far-off but unmistakably concrete support of their sense of freedom in the North Star, Douglass played a variation on the Kantian concept of transcendental freedom when he described the “flash of energetic freedom” in the midst of his complete subjection to the overseer. Douglass’s flash of freedom had an uncertain status wavering between a mere psychological illusion that “flickered for a

moment and vanished” and an indisputable inner reality comparable to the Kantian moral law. Yet, the parallelism between Douglass’s flash of freedom and Kant’s moral law will become clearer when we take into account the former’s unacknowledged relation to a spectacular celestial phenomenon that occurred shortly before Douglass was sent to live with Covey. In November 1833, Douglass witnessed a meteor shower now known as the Leonids. In the *Narrative*, Douglass for some unknown reasons forgot to mention this event. Even so, the incident was a hidden reference point for the other events recounted in the *Narrative*. When the narrator observed that “I have now reached a period of my life when I can give dates,” he didn’t reveal that what enabled him to tally his lifetime with the larger timeframe of the world was the meteoric phenomenon (50). In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass made clear the deep resonance that the spectacular natural event had left in the slave’s mind aspiring for freedom:

I know the year, because it was the one succeeding the first cholera in Baltimore, and was the year, also, of that strange phenomenon, when the heavens seemed about to part with its starry train. I witnessed this gorgeous spectacle, and was awe-struck. The air seemed filled with bright, descending messengers from the sky. It was about daybreak when I saw this sublime scene. I was not without the suggestion, at the moment, that it might be the harbinger of the coming of the Son of Man; and, in my then state of mind, I was prepared to hail Him as my friend and deliverer. I had read, that the “stars shall fall from heaven;” and they were now falling. (245)

Many North American slaves remembered the meteor storm as the “Night the Stars Fell” and regarded it as the sign heralding the coming of Judgment Day.<sup>56</sup> While Southern planters tended to describe the slaves’ terrified responses in a way that emphasized their ignorance and timidity, Douglass revealed that the event had a subversive edge, not only promising for suffering slaves “the rest denied [them] on earth,” but also offering them a

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<sup>56</sup> For some of North American slaves’ responses to the 1833 Leonids meteor shower, see Jones 70 and Walton-Raji.

chance to muse on the possibility of freedom on earth (Littmann 5; Douglass, *My Bondage* 245).<sup>57</sup> The meteoric storm evoked in Douglass's mind the possibility that what seemed permanently unchangeable might change. Gazing on the spectacular wonder of nature, he could imagine he was also able to change, he was also partaking in the radical changeability of the world. In this sense, the importance of the meteoric phenomenon for Douglass consisted in that it confirmed the existence of a world far extending over the slaveholding community and of a law far surpassing that of slaveholders. It brought to light the dominion over him of a force dictating absolute contingency of everything. To this extent, Douglass's experience with the meteoric shower converged with the Kantian description of the sovereign law manifested in the starry heavens.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged how Douglass diverged from Kant in his account of the natural spectacle in which he encountered the idea of freedom. Douglass's characterization of the scene as "sublime" makes visible a common thread in terms of which we can compare the two thinkers' approaches to freedom. In a remarkable way, Douglass's description of the meteoric storm replicates the well-known scenario of the sublime presented in the *Critique of Judgment*, according to which the display of the overwhelming power of nature in "tempests, storms, earthquakes, and so on" is called sublime not due to "submission, prostration, and a feeling of our utter impotence" it provokes in the viewer's mind, but rather in that it "calls forth our own strength" (121-

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<sup>57</sup> In his *Notes on the States of Virginia*, Thomas Jefferson likened the "wild and extravagant" imagination of the black people to a meteor: the black imagination "escapes incessantly from every restraint of reason and taste, and in the course of its vagaries, leaves a tract of thought as incoherent and eccentric, as is the course of a meteor through the sky" (148). As I will argue in the following, Douglass explored the possibility that the black imagination whose trajectory was seemingly vagrant and diverted from the course determined by reason was not so far away from the figurative logic implied in the Kantian "voice of reason."

22). In a paradoxical move, Kant's sublime reaffirms the power of reason precisely because the sublime phenomenon overpowers the mind with its incommensurability yet reason can still comprehend this incommensurability. Just as contemporary natural phenomena that spectacularly displayed the power of nature, such as the 1755 Lisbon earthquake (on which the young Kant wrote three essays), provided Kant with a material from which he wrought up his theory of the sublime as a cornerstone of his monumental philosophical system that revolved around the axes of reason and transcendental freedom, so the Leonids meteor shower in 1833 enabled Douglass to imagine something which would have been otherwise unimaginable. As I argued above, he saw in the natural spectacle a radical possibility of change that encompassed his own possibility of being free. It is important to note, however, that this possibility remained a negative one for Douglass insofar as it originated in the natural phenomenon and not in himself. According to the logic of the Kantian sublime, on the other hand, this negative sense of freedom is in fact the subject's positive ability; what Douglass affirmed in contemplating the meteoric storm was not nature's devastating force but the infinite power of reason within himself.

This is why Kant has stressed that while the connection we sense with the physical world when gazing on the starry heavens is "merely contingent," our connection with the moral law is "universal and necessary" (*Critique of Practical Reason* 133). The "view of a countless multitude of worlds annihilates," argues Kant, "my importance as an *animal creature*, which after its has been for a short time provided with vital force . . . must give back to the planet (a mere speck of the universe) the matter from which it came"; the moral law, by contrast, "reveals to me a life independent of animality and of the whole

sensible world” in the experience that “infinitely raises my worth as an *intelligence*” (133-34). For Kant, a spectacle of nature is sublime not because it reduces me to an insignificant existence in the illimitable immensity of the universe, but because I see the infinity of my own consciousness in it. Kant has called the law that governs ethical consciousness necessary since it necessarily exists, while the sublime phenomenon of nature itself is contingent because it is a mere reflection of intelligence’s own infinite power. As Meillassoux puts it, Kant assumes that “the very idea of consciousness and experience requires a structuring of representation capable of making our world into something other than a purely arbitrary sequence of disconnected impressions” (93). Insofar as consciousness exists, there must be laws to which the world is subjected to appear to consciousness. Thus, even while Kant acknowledges the independent existence of the things-in-themselves, they are ultimately secondary to the laws of reason. The things matter only to the extent that they constitute the limits of the correlationist circle.<sup>58</sup> But the question we need to ask here is whether we can for sure accept Kant’s conclusion. What warrants Kant’s collapsing the experience of an absolute force of nature into the infinite power of reason? Does not the experience rather demonstrate the reign of a law outside reason, or what might be called a law of unreason? At least, Douglass did not follow Kant to the point where he regarded his vague sense of freedom as solely originating in the power of his reason. A slave raised up in a world rife with instances of unlawfulness, Douglass was never certain about what reason meant.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> For Kant’s correlationism, see the Introduction.

<sup>59</sup> I will return to the Kantian sublime in my discussion of Douglass’s apostrophe to the sloops on the Chesapeake Bay later in this chapter.



This difference between Douglass's and Kant's stances to reason is eloquently reflected in their descriptions of the sublime encounter with the idea of freedom in a spectacle of nature. Douglass's flash of freedom does not have the stability of transcendental order that the Kantian starry heavens boast. What characterized the meteor storm that engrossed the American slave was the heavens' catastrophic separation from their "starry train," while for Kant it was the constellations in the sky as an infinite yet unified system that conveyed the sense of transcendental laws. But it must be pointed out that Kant also at times illustrates the law of freedom using a figure that is not wholly in line with the secure order of the starry heavens. In the following, I will examine such a figure, namely, the voice of reason.

#### **THE KANTIAN FIGURATION OF THE LAW OF FREEDOM: THE VOICE OF REASON**

Kant's philosophical system grounds the moral law and the idea of freedom on reason alone, which in turn has no other sources, natural or divine, than itself. If Kant couples the moral law with the starry heavens, this does not mean that the moral law derives from the cosmic order of nature nor from the celestial order of God; rather the starry heavens attest to the existence of the moral law in its own realm not governed by nature or religion. Although the universality of the moral law is likened to that of the law of nature, that does not mean the former is subordinated to the latter; on the contrary, the "*law of nature* [is] merely the type of a *law of freedom*, because without having at hand something which [the most common understanding] could make an example in a case of experience, it could not provide use in application for the law of a pure practical reason." The law of nature gives a tangible form to a supersensible law of freedom, which reason alone can "think" [*denken*] (as opposed to merely 'sense'), and which should remain the

“*form of lawfulness in general*” as long as it is an intelligible but not sensible object (*Critique of Practical Reason* 60-61).<sup>60</sup>

This purely formal nature of the law of freedom, however, poses to Kant a potential difficulty in representing it exactly as such. His illustration of the moral law through the invocation of the starry heavens symptomatically indicates both the subtlety of his language and the difficulty of his enterprise of presenting what is essentially beyond the realm of representation. The dark sky overhead conveys the sense of infinity with its unlimited expanse, *and at the same time* the astral constellations that congregate all over it pointedly instantiate the systematicity of the law. The strength of Kant’s exemplification resides in the integration of the figure (the stars) and the ground (the space), which expresses the two distinct properties of the moral law simultaneously in the plainest and most palpable form. Seen in this light, it is remarkable that in the long course of Kant’s elucidation of the law of freedom appears a figure which, unlike the starry heavens, does not bear the hallmark of infinity or systematicity: the voice of reason [*die Stimme der Vernunft*].<sup>61</sup>

The voice of reason enters the scene when Kant is staging the fight between the transcendental law of morality and the boisterous claim for one’s own happiness as the ultimate target of the will: “[t]his conflict . . . would ruin morality altogether were not the voice of reason in reference to the will so distinct, so irrepressible, and so audible even to

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<sup>60</sup> Kant here makes his characteristic distinction between the sensible, which pertains to merely empirical objects, and the intelligible, a transcendental realm which solely reason can ‘think.’ For this distinction, see also Kant’s following remark in the *Critique of Pure Reason*: “in our thinking the [transcendental] categories are not limited by the conditions of our sensible intuition, but have really an unlimited field” (167).

<sup>61</sup> Here I indicate the German original in parentheses, and hereafter I will do the same whenever it makes my meaning clearer. I have consulted the Shurkamp edition of Kant’s *Kritique der praktischen Vernunft*.

the most common human beings” (32). Pages later, in illustrating the “boundless esteem for the pure moral law stripped of all advantage,” Kant once again invokes the voice of reason: “practical reason, whose voice makes even the boldest evildoer tremble and forces him to hide from its sight, presents it to us for obedience” (68). By calling the voice of reason a “heavenly voice [*himmlische Stimme*]” (32), Kant vaguely suggests a thematic continuity that runs from this figure up to the starry heavens [*der bestirnte Himmel*]. With its ambiguous combination of transience and persistence, however, the voice of reason subtly but definitely diverges from the serene permanence of the starry heavens. Moreover, as I have mentioned above, the voice of reason signifies neither the infinity nor the systematicity of the moral law in any explicit way comparable to the nightly sky alive with stars.

The voice of reason is, then, a figure that illuminates other aspects of the Kantian law of freedom, aspects which are obscured in the gleaming light of the stars that deepens the darkness of the sky. First of all, it demands unconditional submission to the law, unlike the starry sky which silently watches over us and simply demonstrates its correspondence with, rather than coerces obedience to, the law within us. One source of this shrewd ambiguity in the figuration of the Kantian moral law may be traced back to its simultaneous status both as the “mere form of law” and as the “determining ground” of law. In Kant’s words, the moral law is “a law that serves only for the *subjective* form of principles as yet a determining ground through the *objective* form of a law as such” (28). While the starry sky mirrors either aspect to a certain extent, it is too visible to be a pure form, and it cannot claim the absolute unconditionality of the ground. In an attempt

to illustrate the solid ground-ness of the law, Kant resorts to what he names the “fact of reason” [*das Faktum der Vernunft*] and then makes it speak with its voice:

Consciousness of this fundamental law may be called a fact of reason because one cannot reason it out from antecedent data of reason, for example, from consciousness of freedom (since this is not antecedently given to us) and because it instead forces itself upon us of itself as a synthetic a priori proposition that is not based on any intuition, either pure or empirical. . . . in order to avoid misinterpretation in regarding this law as *given*, it must be noted carefully that it is not an empirical fact but the sole fact of pure reason which, by it, announces itself as originally lawgiving. . . . (28-29)<sup>62</sup>

We can detect an origin of Kant’s figuration of reason as voice in this sequence. The fact of reason raises its voice and announces [*ankündigen*] itself. Since the fact of reason demonstrates its own facticity precisely and only with its act of declaring itself, its existence cannot be separated from the voice that pronounces it. In this sense, the fact of reason and the voice of reason are just two figures revolving around the same axis of self-authentication. More broadly speaking, Kant’s diverse figurations of the Law as form, ground, sky, fact, and voice, all point to the one and same logic according to which the Law posits itself as the Law. I hasten to add, however, that I didn’t sum up Kant’s position this way in order to question his argument. Rather, I have dwelled on how Kant grounds the idea of freedom (which was for him a law of freedom) as the cornerstone of his philosophical system with the intention of illuminating the depth that Douglass’s language attained in its indefatigable attempts to delve into how the concept of freedom had pertinence to his own life.

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<sup>62</sup> In *Kant’s Theory of Freedom*, Henry Allison succinctly summarizes the debates concerning the nature of this “fact,” and concludes that “it is best construed as our common consciousness of the moral law as supremely authoritative” (230). Thus Allison dismisses the matter saying “the existence of this fact is not at issue” (230). But is there anything more at issue than this fact in Kant’s moral universe where everything depends on the indisputable factuality of our consciousness of the moral law?

## LAW AND FORCE

Before I return to Douglass, I would like to draw attention to another related issue that presents itself in Kant's account of the fact of reason. Prior to its phenomenalization as a voice, the fact of reason is said to "force itself upon us of itself" [*sich für sich selbst aufdringt*]. We become conscious of the Law as it strikes home to us by and as its pure force and establishes itself as a fact. The subjective reason encounters the objective Law, and thus the fact of reason equates with the moral law, one evidencing the other's existence, only on the condition that the force of their encounter in a circular manner attests to the fact of the encounter. This explains why Kant describes the moral law as a form of lawfulness in general; it demonstrates nothing outside of its own existence, which is completely devoid of content. In this sense, the Kantian moral law is rather a pure force of law which on account of its contentlessness is transcribed as a pure form. Likewise, the voice of reason may be paradoxically described as a silent voice in that it by its wordless pressure demands submission to the law (both moral and reason's) but pronounces nothing about the content of the law.<sup>63</sup>

Thus Kant's approach to the justification of morality, in particular of the idea of freedom as the ultimate ground of morality, is to be characterized as "non-foundationalist" (Reath xxvii). It should be pointed out, however, that the line that distinguishes this non- or anti-foundationalist stance from a mere tautology is quite thin: a law demonstrates its force by the fact of its existence, but what evinces the law's existence is precisely its force. This logic is at the same time so tempting and so problematic that a number of scholars after Kant have elaborated on it. In one of the

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<sup>63</sup> Dollar also points out that "[t]he voice of reason, silent as it may be, is the power of the powerless, the mysterious force which compels us to follow reason" (90).

earliest attempts to engage with the issue, Hegel offers in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) a penetrating critique of the notion of a “*pure beyond*” (88), which seems to be leveled against Kant’s infamous *Ding an sich*, the “thing-in-itself” which is always and by definition beyond the reach of knowledge and inaccessible to assimilation by knowledge. For Kant, the mind’s power to apprehend the world as it is has its own limits. Countering this idea, Hegel postulates that consciousness is “something that goes beyond limits, and since these limits are its own, it is something that goes beyond itself” (51). In the section entitled “Force and the Understanding” [*Kraft und Verstand*],<sup>64</sup> Hegel gives an account of how consciousness penetrates the Kantian void of things-in-themselves: first, it fills the beyond of consciousness with “appearances” [*Erscheinungen*] of its own creation—because “even reveries are better than its own emptiness”—and then, precisely by way of the mediation of appearance, cuts through the “play of Forces” that immediately appears to the mind, to discover the unifying “law of Force” [*Gesetz der Kraft*], the principle that governs all forces (89-90). The difference, however, established between force and the law in this way is to be considered still another appearance, since the law is “the stable *image* [*Bild*] of unstable appearance” (90; emphasis mine). This also means that what the law of force ultimately presents is the mere form of law as such: in Hegel’s words, the unification of all laws in the law of force “expresses no other content than just the *mere concept* [*Begriff*]<sup>65</sup> of law itself, which is posited in that law in the form

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<sup>64</sup> Here I indicate the German original in parentheses, and hereafter I will do the same whenever it makes my meaning clearer. I consult the Felix Meiner edition of Hegel’s *Phänomenologie des Geistes*.

<sup>65</sup> A. V. Miller, the English translator of the edition of the *Phenomenology* I’m referring to here, renders Hegel’s term *Begriff* as “Notion,” in part because, as Michael Inwood points out, “Kant used ‘*notio*’ as its Latin equivalent” (xii n10). As far as I see, however, the majority of English translators of Hegel’s works adopt the word “concept” as an

of *being*” (91). Thus the law of force, which is constituted as a difference from force as such, is in fact “a *simple* Force or is the *concept* of the difference,” which amounts to the same thing as saying that there is no difference since it is “a difference belonging to the *concept*” and not “a *difference belonging to the thing itself*” (94). According to Hegel, what we call “explanation” [*Erklären*] is nothing other than this process of simultaneous establishing and cancelling of a difference:

A law is enunciated; from this, its implicitly universal element or ground is distinguished as *Force*; but it is said that this difference is no difference, rather that the ground is constituted exactly the same as the law. The single occurrence of lightning, e.g., is apprehended as a universal, and this universal is enunciated as the law of electricity; the ‘explanation’ then condenses the *law* into *Force* as the essence of the law. This force, then, is so constituted that when it is expressed, opposite electricities appear, which disappear again into one another; that is, *Force is constituted exactly the same as law*; there is said to be no difference whatever between them. The differences are the pure, universal expression of law, and pure Force; but both have the *same* content, the *same* constitution. Thus the difference *qua* difference of content, of the thing, is also again withdrawn. (94-95; emphases original)

Hegel here proposes the identity of law and force, two apparently distinct elements invoked to explain a phenomenon. I cannot dwell on how consciousness finds an exit from this “tautological movement” in Hegel’s scenario, except that when consciousness grasps the ‘explanation’ itself as its object and conceptually thinks it, it raises itself to the level of “*self-consciousness*” (95, 101). What I would rather like to call attention to is that Hegel’s account replicates the major elements that appear in the Kantian dilation on the idea of freedom: law, force, ground, and form. Hegel performs a precise dissection of

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English equivalent for the term, and “concept” seems to me preferable, since just as the German noun *Begriff* derives from the verb *greifen*, meaning “to grasp” or “to seize,” “concept” etymologically stems from the Latin verb *capere*, “to take” or “to seize.” In this quotation from the *Phenomenology*, therefore, I have changed the English translation’s “Notion” to “concept,” and hereafter I will do the same when quoting from the same book.

what takes place when Kant stumbles upon the fact of reason: the moral law establishes itself on its ground, the fact of reason, but the difference that separates the law from the ground is immediately cancelled since the ground is precisely the force that announces itself as the law. What Hegel details also illuminates the necessity of identifying the moral law as a form of lawfulness in general. In an essay entitled “Force and Signification,” Derrida, amplifying the Hegelian insight, has perceptively observed that “[f]orm fascinates when one no longer has the force to understand force from within itself” (4-5).<sup>66</sup> Both Hegel and Derrida believe Kant’s formalization of the moral law signifies the dead end of his moral philosophy. At the same time, it is important to take Derrida’s caveat against the Hegelian way of taking leave of this impasse seriously: instead of absolving philosophical thinking from the endless repetition of the same force by way of the “*thought* of force” as Hegel did, we must stay alert to “language’s peculiar inability to emerge from itself in order to articulate its origin,” since “[f]orce is the other of language, without which language would not be what it is” (27).<sup>67</sup> No thinker—Kant, Hegel, Douglass, or even Derrida—is completely free of the manifold consequences of this fundamental paradox.

We have seen how Kant’s protean idea of freedom, which is pushed to the limits of knowledge and as a result variously presents itself as law, force, form, ground, sky, or voice, can be grasped through the lenses of Hegel and Derrida. This matter is especially relevant to my argument about Douglass, because the African American author’s “flash

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<sup>66</sup> See also Derrida’s following remark in “Form and Meaning”: “As soon as we use the concept of form—even to criticize *another* concept of form—we must appeal to the evidence of a certain source of sense. And the medium of this evidence can only be the language of metaphysics” (108).

<sup>67</sup> For Derrida’s consideration of the issue of force and law, see “Force of Law.”



of energetic freedom” raises a similar issue that centers on the very possibility of knowledge and representation; the flash was an injunction that silently, yet forcefully, demanded submission to the law of freedom with its pure formality (provided that I’m still allowed to use this word even after Derrida’s criticism) that resisted precise positioning within the parameters of the sensible. Douglass didn’t hear the flash, but did not see it either in the proper sense of the word, because it just “darted through his soul.” It was not exactly an object of the senses; rather it emerged out of nowhere in his mind, from the void of consciousness, as a supersensible object, and announced its advent as a pure ‘energy’ that for a blinking moment electrified him.

In this connection, it is important to recall that Hegel also adduces lightning [*Blitz*] to illustrate the relationship between law and force. In a similar way as Hegel’s lightning, the occurrence of a flash in Douglass’s mind was apprehended as signaling a universal law, and this law was in the same breath condensed into a force with some minimal content (“energetic freedom”) as the essence of the law—a pure force that in a tautological manner announced itself as a form of law in which nothing was prescribed except the most abstracted idea of freedom.

This does not mean, however, that the flash of freedom was a mere ‘explanation’; the flash should be rather deemed an equivalent for what Hegel calls an “*appearance qua appearance*” [*Erscheinung, als Erscheinung*], that is, an appearance that equals the “*truth of the sensuous and the perceived*” (89). In a significant turn away from Kant, Hegel postulates that “the *sensuous* world [is] itself the really actual” (89). For Hegel, reason is something actualized in the sensuous world. Hence his famous statement in the *Philosophy of Right* (1821): “What is rational is actual and what is actual is rational”

[“*Was vernünftig ist, das ist Wirklich; und was wirklich ist, das ist vernünftig*”] (*Outlines of the Philosophy of Right* 14). Accordingly, for Hegel, the supersensible beyond comes into being only insofar as it is mediated by appearance, and in a characteristic twist of the Hegelian dialectic, appearance, the mediating matter for the supersensible to become an object of perception, turns out rather its “essence” and “filling” (*Phenomenology of Spirit* 89). I cannot overstress the crucial yet ambiguous role of this mediator in the Hegelian drama of force and consciousness. Force appears precisely as it vanishes. In Hegel’s words, “[t]he middle term which unites the two extremes, the Understanding [*i.e.*, consciousness] and the inner world [*i.e.*, the supersensible beyond], is the developed *being* of Force, which, for the Understanding itself, is henceforth only a vanishing” (86-87). Why so? Because the being of force is available to knowledge as appearance only and precisely to the extent that it is posited as the opposite of a negative force or of the non-being of force which is posited by the same strike: the being is “a pure *positedness* or a being that is *posited by an other*” [*ein reines Gesetzsein durch ein anderes*]<sup>68</sup> and as a result, this pure appearing to be or pure becoming has its inseparable reverse side, “the significance of a sheer *vanishing* [*Verschwinden*]” (85). This explains why lightning exemplifies for Hegel the being of force. Not only does lightning illumine the supersensible beyond which Hegel likens to “pure darkness” (89); the pure darkness itself becomes available as an object of knowledge by virtue of the opposites of being and

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<sup>68</sup> Note that the German word for “law” is *Gesetz*, which derives from the verb *setzen* (*to put* or *to posit*) and hence literally means “that which is posited.” Thus the implication of force in law is once again indicated.

nothing that result from the cut the lightning creates in the darkness precisely by the force of its emergence.<sup>69</sup>

Hegel's lightning, then, may be productively compared with Douglass's flash of freedom. Under the deepest shadow of Covey's domineering menace, Douglass witnessed in his mind a flash 'darting through' his soul, and to the extent that the pure 'form' of the flashing light was inseparable from its accompanying minimum content, a "faint beam of hope," the flash itself "flickered for a moment, and then vanished," in a manner not unlike Hegel's force that comes into being for consciousness in the simultaneous conjunction of appearing and vanishing. The flash actualized the idea of freedom for the slave by the very fact of its making appearance as a positive of the pure darkness of complete subjection that entrapped him. It conveyed no content other than freedom precisely because it issued forth out of the utter absence of freedom, and because of this minimal construction of being and nothing, it could figure as an idea, a fact, a force, or a form of freedom, depending on the perspective taken. There was some inner necessity passing through Hegel's lightning to Douglass's flash, which led each of them to enlist the aid of a similar figure to conceptualize the fleeting but unquestionable actualization of a supersensible truth.

A similar necessity also links Kant and Douglass, though in a more ambiguous way. If Kant couldn't help transposing the compelling force of the moral law into the voice of reason, the flash of freedom, with its momentary explosion of force that bade him to follow the idea of freedom, left in Douglass's consciousness a smoldering fire whose

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<sup>69</sup> In this sense, Lacan's point about the "stroke of the opening" that makes absence emerge, which I have already cited in my discussion of Esther's cries, applies to the logic at work in Douglass's flash of freedom as well (*Four Fundamental* 26).

intensity and persistence were to be properly expressed in aural terms. Even after the flash vanished, Douglass's mind still harbored its lingering tremor that was never fully present but kept stirring him like a sound silently ringing in his ears.

Yet, the Kantian voice of reason cuts so authoritarian a figure (recall that it "makes even the boldest evildoer tremble") that it also radically goes against what Douglass aimed at with the flash of freedom. For Kant, the voice of reason is first and foremost a law that demands unconditional submission from us. Even if what results is, as Kant asserts, a "*free* submission of the will to the law" (*Practical Reason* 68), we cannot completely dispel the suspicion that such a freedom is in fact predicated on an illusion which allies itself with the notorious "metaphysics of presence": the voice of reason is so fully present to consciousness and speaks so immediately to it, that it renders the exercise of our own free will wholly unnecessary or impossible. Kant, to be sure, judiciously takes a precautionary measure against this line of reasoning by stressing the purely formal nature of the moral law, as we have seen earlier; we need to exert our own mind's power to find some appropriate content to fill in the central void of the injunction, even as we are all the while pushed to obey the law by the force of the commanding voice. At the same time, however, it can be argued that the voice of reason forces upon us the authoritarian 'face' of the law that masks this essential emptiness of the message. In that case, we do not act by our own free will, but in accordance with what our mind imagines the law desires. Thus the Kantian voice of reason may rather induce the full presence of the law that does not leave the room for a free will to come into play. It is pregnant with the bleak prospect that reason remains an absolute Other which one-sidedly issues

commands, and accordingly that the subject cannot recognize reason as part of himself and is permanently alienated from it.

In Douglass's *Narrative*, by contrast, the flash of freedom remained something faint, simultaneously appearing and vanishing, and always elusive. It revealed no full-frontal 'face' of the law, a fading presence which indistinctly evaporated into the lingering, muffled echoes it left behind. To that extent, the flash was not an inaccessible Other standing on the far side of an unbridgeable gulf; it was a revelation of the slave's own inner truth of freedom, appreciated as part and parcel of himself. It should be noted, however, that there was a limitation to its liberating possibilities. Insofar as it remained an *inner* truth and no more, the flashing idea of freedom was perennially confined within Douglass's consciousness, which was thereby all the more alienated from the hard facts of slavery that it seemed utterly in vain to work on. In this respect, Douglass's retrospective observation that "[m]y sufferings on this plantation seem now like a dream rather than a stern reality" is revealing (59). It indicates how the slave's consciousness winced at the "stern reality" and withdrew into its own interiority. As a result, the inner spark, instead of claiming its own competing "stern reality" against the ongoing cruelties in the real world, fell into a dreamlike psychological spectacle adjunct to a larger nightmare of real suffering. It comes as no surprise, then, that in the next scene Douglass put the idea of freedom into action in an attempt to resist this rising tide of a wholesale reality-turning-into-dream that threatened likewise to engulf the prized idea and to diminish it to a mere psychological freedom. To be sure, he had so far made strenuous efforts to know freedom and carried out numerous secret actions as means to attain freedom; but this time, he had to perform an act of freedom—an act which was the end in

itself in that precisely through carrying it out, Douglass firmly anchored the abstract idea of freedom in his own disposition, as the object of his own supreme desire, as the blood and bone of his existence. It was a solitary vocal act of freedom performed to shake off the darkest hands of utter subjugation that captured him.

#### **APOSTROPHE TO SLOOPS ON THE CHESAPEAKE BAY**

The flash of freedom left silent yet insuppressible echoes which were waiting to resurge in Douglass, and which actually rose with irresistible force when the circumstance that bound him in the state of complete thralldom fortuitously presented a contingent sign of freedom. Douglass's encounter with such a sign of freedom took place on the nearby shore of the Chesapeake Bay. Covey's farm was located just a short walk from the Bay,

whose broad bosom was ever white with sails from every quarter of the habitable globe. Those beautiful vessels, robed in purest white, so delightful to the eye of freemen, were to me so many shrouded ghosts, to terrify and torment me with thoughts of my wretched condition. I have often, in the deep stillness of a summer's Sabbath, stood all alone upon the lofty banks of that noble bay, and traced, with saddened heart and tearful eye, the countless number of sails moving off to the mighty ocean. The sight of these always affected me powerfully. (59)

The white sails externalized the internal reality of freedom, and with their purest whiteness, the sails multiplied the formality of the flashing light of freedom. This remarkable variation Douglass played on the theme of freedom raised the question of identification. Freedmen could, Douglass imagined, readily identify themselves with the free-floating ships, but slaves like him were denied such a blissful identification. Rather, the ships appeared as "so many shrouded ghosts," and brought home to him his "wretched condition."

Given its emphatic white symbolism and the contrast it effectively establishes between the black narrator and the white objects, it is tempting to read the scene in racial terms (the white sails represented free white citizens as opposed to black slaves, and Douglass was jealous of “white” freedom, and ultimately of “whiteness” itself . . . ), but in undertaking such a reading we must be careful not to fall in the impasse of a simplistic racial dichotomy that the *Narrative* cannily sidestepped. The white sails in this scene function as a sign for freedom in a way that makes any simple application of either/or inappropriate. This becomes clear when we examine the scene in terms of the aesthetic discourse that markedly animated it, that is, the dialectic of the sublime. We have already briefly seen how Douglass’s description in *My Bondage and My Freedom* of the Leonids meteor shower loosely followed the scenario of the sublime. In the account of his encounter with the white sails on the Chesapeake Bay, the structural proximity to this aesthetic discourse is more pronounced, even though the word “sublime” is not mentioned in the scene.

One of the remarkable features of the feeling of the sublime is that it is called forth on the condition that we see the display of violence in nature *like a picture*. Let us look at Kant’s explanation in the *Critique of Judgment*:

. . . consider bold, overhanging and, as it were, threatening rocks, thunderclouds piling up in the sky and moving about accompanied by lightning and thunderclaps, volcanoes with all their destructive power, hurricanes with all the devastation they leave behind, the boundless ocean heaved up, the high waterfall of a mighty river, and so on. Compared to the might of any of these, our ability to resist becomes an insignificant trifle. Yet the sight of them becomes all the more attractive the more fearful it is, *provided we are in a safe place*. (120; emphasis mine)

The distance established by the safe positioning that separates me from nature’s violence makes it possible to convert the dejected sense of impotence into the elated feeling of my

mind's "superiority over nature itself"; but for this frame through which I observe the exhibition of nature's force, I remain reduced to an "insignificant trifle" overwhelmed by nature's "omnipotence" (120). Standing "all alone upon the lofty banks of that noble bay," Douglass likewise assumed the position of an observer who saw the spectacle of myriad ships as if through a window, from the hither side of the shoreline.

This comparison between Kant's and Douglass's versions of the sublime should not blind us to their differences. First, what Douglass saw was artifacts, not exactly a natural object as in Kant's definition of the sublime. We can readily dismiss this difference, since the vessels and the bay presented a unified image as the sloops rode on the bosom of the bay, and the bay itself was the path to freedom. Moreover, it is important to recall that in the Kantian sublime, the emphasis is placed on the subjective feeling called forth in the observer's mind by objects, not on the objects *per se*. In this sense, we might even say that in the Kantian framework there is no "object," in the common sense of the term, which is the real source of the feeling of the sublime; violence in nature might be terrifying or overwhelming, but it is only through the mediation of the subject's "ability to judge ourselves independent of nature" that nature appears sublime (120-21). Moreover, Kant does not limit the sublime to the experience of contact with nature.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Of course, it was not uncommon in the conventional discourse of the sublime to extend the list of what counted as sublime beyond the bounds of nature. Edmund Burke's paradigmatic work on the sublime, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (the first edition published in 1757), for example, enumerated many qualities and instances that pertained to the sublime, irrespective of whether they derived from the domain of nature or not. Burke's treatise inspired the young Kant to write *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1763). Even in his mature elaboration on the sublime in the *Critique of Judgment* (1790), Kant acknowledged Burke as the "foremost author" on the topic (138). No matter how exemplary of the dominant attitude concerning the sublime from the late eighteenth century on Burke's "empiricist" approach might be, Kant's "formalist" approach is more



Besides what he calls “the dynamically sublime in nature,” Kant presents another type of the sublime, “the mathematically sublime,” which he links to reason’s ability to “think of the infinite . . . as *given in its entirety* (in its totality)” (111). Douglass’s sublime strides across the conventional description of the sublime in nature towards the conceptual crux of this discourse, making, as it were, a Kantian leap, so that it touches upon the idea of freedom, the cornerstone of Kant’s system, in which the concept of infinity, along with that of freedom, is a constitutive part of transcendental reason.

Another important difference between Kant’s and Douglass’s cases of the sublime is that even though Douglass saw the multitudinous array of ships on the Chesapeake Bay like a picture, he was not exactly in a safe place as the Kantian observer was. In Kant’s scenario of the sublime, physical force is embodied by the object we see, without causing real damage to our security by virtue of the spectatorial distance we keep. Douglass gave a remarkable twist to this scenario by displacing a real object of terror with something which itself was by no means threatening. At the same time, it is arguable that here Douglass merely pushed the logic implied in the sublime to its consequence; as we have already seen, the position of the object of terror was virtually vacated when the feeling of the sublime was attributed not so much to the object as to the subject who saw it. It was solely by the agency of Douglass’s mind that what were “so delightful to the eye of freemen” turned into “so many shrouded ghosts.” On the other hand, Douglass was free from the charge of “subjectivism” that the Kantian position might incur. The source of terror, a real mortal danger, was indisputably *there*, not, as in the Kantian (as well as the

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illuminating for my discussion of Douglass in relation to the idea of freedom. For the characterization of Burke’s and Kant’s approaches to the sublime as “empiricist” and “formal idealist” respectively, see Ferguson vii.

conventional) sublime, on the other side of the protective window of aesthetic spectatorship, but just behind his back on the same ground on which he stood, threatening at any time to strike a fatal blow on his body and soul, or the entire atmosphere which he was inhaling itself being saturated with such threat. At this point, Douglass decisively diverged from the Kantian sublime by presenting an instance that called into question one of the important premises of Kant's argument:<sup>71</sup> what warrants us to see in the feeling of the sublime our mind's "superiority over nature," if this superiority is to be realized only to the extent that we are physically protected from real danger? Is this not rather a case of self-delusion in which we imagine our transcendence over nature while we in fact remain yoked to the demand of our physical nature?

This divergence translates into the third salient difference between Kant and Douglass which concerns the effect brought about on the mind in the process of the sublime encounter. In the Kantian sublime, the mind is elevated over nature, in spite of the initial dejection one feels facing its incommensurable force, thanks to an intermediary space between one and what one sees. Without such a protection, on the other hand, and within the very sphere of a threatening influence, Douglass was deeply depressed ("terrified" and "tormented," in his words) to think of his present "wretched condition" in contrast to the pleasing view of legions of "free" ships that unfolded before his eyes.

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<sup>71</sup> Kant argues that the mind's feeling of its own sublimity "loses nothing from the fact that we must find ourselves safe in order to feel this exciting liking, so that (as it might seem), since the danger is not genuine, the sublimity of our intellectual ability might also not be genuine. For here the liking concerns only our ability's *vocation*, revealed in such cases, insofar as the predisposition of this ability is part of our nature, whereas it remains up to us, as our obligation, to develop and exercise this ability. And there is truth in this, no matter how conscious of his actual present impotence man may be when he extends his reflection thus far" (121). My argument questions this clear-cut disjunction of the mind's ability from the body's actual present impotence.

Apparently, the two cases develop in diagonally opposite directions. In their very opposite movements, however, they share the same structural moments: the spectator stands in close contact with fatal danger (in a simulated way in one case, and in reality in the other), and in this encounter, the spectator catches, as it were, the supersensible shadow of transcendental reason (manifested in the feeling of superiority over nature in one, and the revitalized, even if seemingly all the more unattainable, idea of freedom in the other). In Douglass's case, the real danger was reflected on the white sails which functioned as a kind of mirror.

However, there is a more important sense in which the sails were a mirror in a more critical sense—a sense parallel to Lacan's seminal account of the “mirror-stage”: one recognizes one's own image in the mirror, but only from the standpoint of the Other. Douglass found in the mirror what he could identify himself with, and yet simultaneously was compelled to recognize an irreducible difference from this idealized image. The ship was himself, he recognized, but at the very moment of this identification he was divided; he was alienated from himself. Likewise, it is not difficult to see the same mirror structure—a structure in which identity and difference are set into interplay in a mutually constitutive manner—in the dialectic of the sublime: the subject identifies an aspect, not the whole, of him- or herself with the sublime force of nature. As Alenka Zupančič argues in her book on Kant and Lacan, *Ethics of the Real*, “the feeling of the sublime, the reverse side of which is always a kind of anxiety, requires the subject to regard a part of herself as a foreign body, as something that belongs not to her but to the ‘outer world’” (152). This part of oneself which one identifies with nature's omnipotence is, according to Zupančič, the “superego,” a moral agency in the mind which judges and censures the

ego: “in the Kantian perspective, a confrontation with something that is terrifying ‘in itself’ . . . strikes the subject as a kind of bodying forth of the cruel, unbridled and menacing superego—the ‘real or reverse side’ of the moral law (in us)” (156). To the extent that the very logic of identification opens a dehiscence in the subject, the sublime replicates the central dynamics at work between Douglass and what he saw on the Chesapeake Bay.

It should be noted, however, that Douglass at the same time critically departed from the discourse of the sublime (whether Kant’s or conventional) in that he neither did nor could identify himself with the superego to the point that, as in the feeling of the sublime, the gap in himself was (at least seemingly) fully filled up by the concurrent sense of superiority. Rather, he consistently lays stress on the gap itself in the whole process. Moreover, Douglass left open the status of that part of himself that corresponded to the idea of freedom, insofar as this idea was reflected on the white sails in the state of its “purest” abstraction, or at least insofar as the formal appearance of the law was not yet fully supplanted by its ‘reverse side,’ the superego. In this sense, we might argue that Douglass, as it were, undid the step Kant had taken in adapting the concept of the moral law, already elaborated in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, into the framework of the *Critique of Judgment*. Zupančič specifies this shift in Kant’s work as “the advent of the figure of an absolute other” in the form of the superego, a figure which “fills a hole in the Other (the Law),” notwithstanding the vital (if not so obvious) argument of the second *Critique*, which could be summarized as the proposition that “a certain inconsistency or

incompleteness of the Other (the moral law) is the very kernel of ethics” (146-47).<sup>72</sup> What made Douglass’s response to the view of a multitude of ships on the Chesapeake fundamentally divided was the irreducibility of this uncertain Other; utterly deprived of what was commonly given the name of freedom, he was not sure what the idea of freedom would do or offer to him; all he knew was that there was and should be freedom. In this crucial respect, Douglass was more faithful to the central thread that ran through the Kantian ethics than Kant himself, an element which was obscured in the German philosopher’s later treatise on aesthetic judgment.<sup>73</sup>

The above argument also illuminates the issue I mentioned a few pages earlier: the racial implications of the white sails. If the white ships symbolized white freedom in contrast to black enslavement, and if Douglass identified himself with whiteness to a certain degree, this whiteness was essentially suspended between the fully embodied whiteness of white citizenship and the idea of freedom in its “purest” state. In other words, the whiteness is here taken beyond the common register of signification to the

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<sup>72</sup> Zupančič cites the introduction of the moral law’s voice and gaze as symptomatic of the advent of an absolute other in Kant’s work (147). As Dolar makes clear, however, the voice of reason plays a more ambiguous role in Kant than Zupančič admits (88-91). My argument is that the figure of voice does not always work to shut out an “inconsistency or incompleteness of the Other,” especially in Douglass’s work.

<sup>73</sup> The issue of the status of the Other in the discourse of the sublime must be considered in terms of what Meillassoux points out concerning the modern scientific revolution initiated by Galileo and Copernicus. “The sense of desolation and abandonment,” argues Meillassoux, “which modern science instills in humanity’s conception of itself and of the cosmos has no more fundamental cause than this: it consists in the thought’s contingency for the world, and the recognition that thought become able to think a world that can dispense with thought, a world essentially unaffected by whether or not anyone thinks it” (116). As we have already seen in the Introduction, Kant’s Critical philosophy was a response to the crisis left open by this scientific discovery of the physical world as the absolute other of humanity. In this sense, Kant’s elaboration of the sublime in the third *Critique* is to be regarded as part of his systematic attempts to accommodate this irreducible otherness and to moderate the terribly unsettling sense of desolation and abandonment it brought with it.

ultimate, where it becomes, as it were, blinding light and thus is indistinguishable from blackness in its deprivation of vision.<sup>74</sup> In this important sense, Douglass followed one potentially radical consequence of the dialectic of the sublime, which might be termed the convergence of opposites. Burke's classic treatise on the sublime, for instance, mentions that "[e]xtreme light, by overcoming the organs of sight, obliterates all objects, so as in its effect exactly to resemble darkness" (74).<sup>75</sup> Quite conversant with the Kantian aesthetic of the sublime, Hegel illustrates the supersensible 'beyond' of consciousness with a hypothetical situation in which "a blind man is placed amid the wealth of the supersensible world," and then equates this situation with another in which "one with sight is placed in pure darkness, or if you like, in pure light," because "[t]he man with sight sees as little in that pure light as in pure darkness, and just as much as the blind man, in the abundant wealth which lies before him" (*Phenomenology of Spirit* 88). Hegel's illustration makes palpable how the dialectic of the sublime, in which opposites converge by its inner logic, turns on the issue of the Other, since the supersensible beyond is just another name for the Other. To put it schematically, the convergence of opposites could be deemed the obverse side of the irreducibility of the Other: the Other creates in the chain of signification a hole (an inconsistency or incompleteness), around which the logic

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<sup>74</sup> Although I cannot discuss it in this dissertation, it would be interesting to compare Douglass's white sails with Melville's elucidation of the white color in the chapter titled "The Whiteness of the Whale" in *Moby-Dick*, considering the latter's emphasis on white's "elusive" as well as "sublime" character—"in essence," argues Melville, "whiteness is not so much a color as the visible absence of color, and at the same time the concrete of all colors" (160, 165).

<sup>75</sup> It should be noted that with all its insight, Burke's disquisition on the sublime was not wholly free of racial coloring when he adduced an anecdote of a boy who had been blind and regained his sight: "the first time the boy saw a black object, it gave him great uneasiness; and that some time after, upon accidentally seeing a negro woman, he was struck with great horror at the sight" (131).

of either/or collapses and opposites meet. This logic of converging opposites vitally informs Douglass's symbolism of whiteness, and to that extent definitively differentiates it from the average form of "race consciousness."<sup>76</sup>

We have seen how Douglass's account of his encounter with the sailing vessels on the Chesapeake Bay recapitulates the primary dynamics of the sublime and at the same time departs from its conventions in significant ways. It should be pointed out that the passage in question takes another remarkable turn as Douglass goes on to narrate, "[t]he sight of these always affected me powerfully. My thoughts would compel utterance; and there, with no audience but the Almighty, I would pour out my soul's complaint, in my rude way, with an apostrophe to the moving multitude of ships . . ." (59). When we come upon the highly stylized language of Douglass's actual "apostrophe" that follows (e.g. "O that I were free! O, that I were on one of your gallant decks, and under your protecting wing! Alas! betwixt me and you, the turbid waters roll"), however, we are led to question the truthfulness of the author's words; the use of such "literary flourishes" draws us to suspect, as William Andrews puts it, "we are not reading the spontaneous outburst of a wretched slave" (281). What Douglass aims at in this scene, of course, is not the faithful reproduction of what he actually said, but to show how a bondman, or a "man transformed into a brute," can use words as masterfully as, or perhaps even more masterfully than, his master; to demonstrate, in other words, that he was steadily on the

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<sup>76</sup> By extension, the convergence of opposites could be an enabling condition for what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has described as the "ironic reversals so peculiar to [Douglass's] text" (*Figures in Black* 89). In a similar vein, this might also explain what Paul Gilroy points out as the "carefully deployed ambiguity" in Douglass's remark that "a slight gleam or shadow of [the conjuror Sandy Jenkins's] superstition had fallen upon me" (62; *My Bondage* 281). I will come back to this matter later in my discussion of the magic root Jenkins gave to Douglass a day before his confrontation with Covey.

way towards gaining “literary mastery over the brute facts of the slave past” (Andrews 134). What Douglass in effect constructs here would be, then, the contrast or comparison between present full literacy and past illiteracy, between sophisticated eloquence and rudimentary factuality, with unquestioned priority attached to the first item of each dyad.

A second look at Douglass’s account, however, reveals that we need to locate a distinction at another level—a differentiation related to the one just mentioned, but more internal to the sequence and coordinated within the ‘present’ of the narrated past: the distinction between the act of utterance into which his thoughts drove him and what was said in this utterance, between the bare fact that Douglass uttered and the content of the sentiments and ideas he uttered. Here I follow the distinction made in structural linguistics between the enunciation (*énonciation*) and the statement (*énoncé*), the one that Lacan paraphrases with the following words: “the *I* of the enunciation is not the same as the *I* of the statement, that is to say, the shifter which, in the statement, designates him” (*Four* 139). It was this splitting between the *I* of the enunciation and the *I* of the statement that Douglass enacted in his “apostrophe” to the sloops on the Chesapeake. The statement designates Douglass, the *I* of the statement, as one completely deprived of freedom in stark contrast to the moving vessels, which he apostrophized as “freedom’s swift-winged angels” (59). At the level of the enunciation, on the other hand, Douglass posits himself as a subject who enjoys freedom, to the extent that he is the one who expresses himself through utterance, that no one other than he occupies the position of the *I* of the enunciation. Without this subject of freedom as the origin of the whole utterance, there would have been neither the exposition of Douglass’s predicament nor the demonstration of his linguistic performance.



The above formulation, however, begs the question, what is the status of this subject of freedom? For, strictly speaking, the subject of the enunciation comes into being only when “the *I*, determined retroactively, becomes a signification, engendered at the level of the statement, of what it produces at the level of the enunciation” (Lacan, *Four* 139). In other words, the *I* of the enunciation is an absent point, whose position is only *ex post facto* marked as a kind of shadow of the *I* that is represented in and by the statement.<sup>77</sup> In Douglass’s account, of course, the subject of the enunciation was not really absent, because rather than retroactively determined, this subject was the direct outcome of his thinking: “My thoughts would compel utterance.” And yet, even if this was the case, the question remains of how we should conceive of the subject of thinking who, as if in a leap, comes out as the subject of the enunciation. To put it another way, did Douglass merely follow the Western metaphysical tradition, specifically the tradition of the Cartesian *I think*, and like this tradition end in a mystification by smuggling, in the name of the *I* of the *cogito*, what Lacan calls a “monster or homunculus” inside man, “the celebrated little fellow who governs” man’s mind and who plays the role of “the driver” (*Four* 141)? This question is especially important for my argument, since what is at stake here is nothing other than the mind’s freedom, or its ability to will independently of all its external determinations. If Douglass revived any ‘homuncular’ agent in his conceptualization of freedom, this means he had a ‘master’ other than Covey in his own mind, and contrary to his words, he would have remained, even after the fight with the slave driver, a slave not only “in form” but “in fact” as well (65).

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<sup>77</sup> This is, it seems to me, why Lacan designates the subject, which is the subject of the enunciation among others, with the barred *S*, the symbol that, as is well known, illustrates the fact that the subject is essentially divided.

This question sends us back to the issue I have already mentioned: the status of the Other in Douglass's 'sublime' encounter with the moving vessels. For from within the dynamics of this encounter arose his "thoughts." Was there any secret agent behind the whole process, who propelled his thoughts and compelled his utterance? As we have seen, there was no agent in the Kantian sublime presented in the *Critique of Judgment* other than the observer's mind, with nature functioning as a mirror, reflecting back and magnifying the mind's image of itself as the superego. Accordingly, we can argue that in this case, the superego is the "homunculus" who takes over the task of thinking from the ego. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, on the other hand, Kant proposes a slightly different, and subtler model, in which the *I*, as a moral agent, ineluctably confronts the Other called the moral law. Faced with that Other, the moral subject does not and cannot neglect it (by simply turning away from it, for instance, or by reducing it to an absolute other, or to the internal absolute other which Lacan calls a homunculus), but the course of his action is not exactly determined by the Other, since what he sees in the Other is only the form of lawfulness in general which has no content. Which model Douglass was closer to in his description of the apostrophe to the free sloops is difficult to determine. Reflected on the white sails, the idea of freedom was undeniably an other to Douglass, an alienating presence which he could not approach. In this sense, it cannot be denied that Douglass to some degree "monsterized" (a common way of "Othering")<sup>78</sup> the white sails

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<sup>78</sup> Such "monsterization" is not uncommon in the literature of the sublime. In the *Prelude*, for a well-known example, Wordsworth narrates how "a huge cliff, / As if with voluntary power instinct, / Upreared its head," and "With measured motion, like a living thing / Strode after me" (11). Although a detailed examination of this issue is beyond the scope of my argument, I would like to briefly point out a major difference in monsterization in Douglass and Wordsworth: while what caused the monsterization in Wordsworth was guilt (the poet was rowing a stolen boat when this incident took place), Douglass placed

by representing them as “shrouded ghosts” that terrified and tormented him. On the other hand, to the extent that he saw a luminous shadow image of his own utter deprivation in the sails, they were not a total other to Douglass. But this does not mean that Douglass turned the idea of freedom into an object of absolute terror as some versions of the sublime do, nor that his superego completely obliterated the otherness of the being that confronted him. Rather, Douglass and the idea of freedom remained independent agents and maintained an incommensurable relationship with each other, and from within that relationship his “thoughts” took shape as a result of the interlocking and exchange between them. And again, this incommensurability was not exactly the one that characterizes the Kantian sublime. What connected the slave and freedom was not the necessary link of the infinity of reason but a purely contingent convergence of the opposites.

This point will be clearer if we reexamine Douglass’s apostrophe in terms of its ‘echoic’ structure. As we have seen, the dialectic of the sublime has the fundamental structure of a ‘mirror,’ and Douglass’s account of the moving vessels roughly replicates it. We can reformulate this mirror structure using the model of echo: when witnessing the spectacle of nature’s violent force, the spectator at first experiences merely powerlessness and displeasure; but then, as Zupančič puts it, “suddenly, an inversion takes place, an ‘echo’ of this first feeling, which expresses itself as the feeling of the sublime: in his ‘physical’ powerlessness the subject becomes aware of a power that he has as a rational being, capable of ‘elevating’ himself above natural and phenomenal existence” (149). In a sense, the echo model is more appropriate than the mirror to describe the feeling of the

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the idea of freedom in the center of the scenario and by so doing altered the whole structure.

sublime, since it effectively illustrates the mind's transcendental elevation of itself over nature and thereby shrewdly obscures the existence of its interlocutor. In the ordinary type of the sublime (including Kant's), the subject that feels sublimity is a self-sufficient echo chamber, and nature is just its dispensable prop. Given its teleology towards the mind's superiority over nature, it is no wonder that the discourse of the sublime indeed possesses an inherent tendency to reduce the dialectic of subject and object into a monodrama of the self and to work towards the obliteration of the uncertain Other. And in Douglass's case, too, such a tendency asserted itself and resulted in his soliloquy in a high flaunting language. Yet it should be pointed out that in spite of its abstraction on the "purest" whiteness of the sails, the idea of freedom did not wholly evaporate in the eloquent slave's magnified subjectivity. Douglass's mind did not opportunistically appropriate the idea of freedom as a means to magnify itself; nor did the idea remain absolutely alien to the slave throughout the process. Rather, the irreducible presence of the idea of freedom impressed a dialogic structure on the whole exchange and prevented it from directly feeding into Douglass's single subjectivity without a residue. We need to take this dialogic structure in its strict sense, without reducing it to one of its poles. The dialogic interaction took place not within the mind alone, but between the subject and the externally objectified idea, which was crystallized on the white sails. The indelible otherness of his interlocutor drove Douglass to express his desire for freedom towards the other in words, and as a result he discovered himself as a free subject of utterance.

To this extent, Douglass's vocal performance was an act of freedom carried out at the level of the enunciation, even while he bewailed his total privation of freedom at the level of the statement. As Douglass lamented in his soliloquy, he was on the furthest end

from freedom, and the view of the freely moving sloops on the Chesapeake enhanced his despair with its stark contrast to his situation. What he did in this state of consummate deprivation was to turn the absolute lack itself into the ground on which he acted out his freedom, using the only property at his disposal, namely, the voice. Through the act of utterance, he performatively demonstrated that he was free at least at the level of the enunciation. From the void of freedom, Douglass leaped into an act of freedom precisely as he expressed himself as a free subject. More correctly speaking, this leap itself was an act of freedom, insofar as by the leap Douglass emerged as a figure (freedom) separated from the ground (the lack of freedom). Houston Baker's observation that "[f]rom what appears a blank and awesome backdrop, Douglass wrests significance" is pertinent here (*The Journey Back* 35). Douglass wrested the signification of freedom from the blank backdrop where no prospect of liberty was in view, and he carried out this act by making a break from the total absence of freedom exactly with his enunciation. The act of utterance turned the despair about freedom into the renewed resolve to seek freedom by demonstrating his potential power to emerge as a free being from the utter absence of freedom.

It must be emphasized, however, that this speech act was still an incomplete act of freedom, and fell short of the act Douglass aimed it to be, insofar as he was still a slave not only "in form" but also "in fact," as he put it (65). Douglass's vocal performance was ultimately a divided act in which enunciation was permanently sundered from statement. Douglass couldn't carry out a true act of freedom, in the fullest sense in which he conceived of it, until the fight with Covey. It was as if he attempted to jump onto the other side of an existential gulf so that he would turn into a new subject of willing but

once having done that he discovered the ground on which he was standing was still the same hither side. This begs the question of how Douglass conceptualized the “fact” or the “act” of freedom for himself. I will address this question in the next chapter. For the time being, it should be enough to point out that while for Kant the act of freedom is first and foremost an act that takes place in the mind, for Douglass the same act must involve not only a change of the actor’s mindset or the declaration of a resolve but also working on the objective world in accordance with the idea of freedom so that the change in subjectivity gains its objective equivalent. In order to clarify the complex intersection of Douglass’s and Kant’s thoughts concerning the idea of freedom as the determining ground of moral actions, I will in the following section look at how they each conceptualize pleasure as the ultimate driving force for disobedience (or obedience) to law.

### **LAW AND PLEASURE**

The divergence and convergence of Douglass’s and Kant’s figurations of the idea of freedom partly stem from their different ways of comprehending law in its relationship to pleasure. As I have already mentioned, Kant considers the moral law as dependent on nothing other than itself, which means that what he calls “*transcendental freedom*” is to be deemed independent “from all sensible determining grounds,” that is, “from everything empirical and so from nature generally” (81, 94). This involves independence from every ‘natural’ desire of one’s own connected with “self-love or one’s own happiness” or with the feeling of pleasure [*Lust*], which ultimately depends on “the representation of the existence of a thing” and therefore is empirically determined (19). In Kant’s precise terminology, one must attain independence from one’s own “*inclinations*

[*Neigungen*], at least as motives determining (even if not as *affecting*) our desire”—he allows what he calls the “faculty of desire” [*Begehrungsvermögen*] to play some not negligible role in directing our will, but final authority is unquestionably reserved to the will itself (98, 19).<sup>79</sup> It was in an attempt at rigidly divorcing the moral law from all empirical and sensible determining grounds that Kant elevates the law into “duty” [*Pflicht*] and with uncharacteristic fervor apostrophizes to the heroized idea of duty that infuses in us a feeling of respect [*Achtung*], by which we are tempted to follow its order, and that with dignity yet without violence spurns all surreptitious advances made by pleasure-seeking inclinations:

*Duty!* Sublime and mighty name that embraces nothing charming or insinuating but requires submission, and does not seek to move the will by threatening anything that would arouse natural aversion or terror in the mind but only holds forth a law that of itself finds entry into the minds and yet gains reluctant reverence (though not always obedience), a law before which all inclinations are dumb, even though they secretly work against it; what origin is there worthy of you, and where is to be found the root of your noble descent which proudly rejects all kinship with the inclinations . . . ? (73)

Rendered this way, duty becomes absolute to such a degree that its connection with the workings of pleasure is virtually disavowed. For Douglass, by contrast, an entangled relation between duty and pleasure could not go unnoticed as he delved deeper and deeper into his own experience on the slave-holding plantations. His hesitant approach to the idea of law which averted his course away from the Kantian sacralization of duty had an empirical basis.

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<sup>79</sup> Kant defines ‘life,’ the ‘faculty of desire,’ and ‘pleasure’ in relation to each other in the following way: “*Life* is the faculty of a being to act in accordance with laws of the faculty of desire. The *faculty of desire* is a being’s *faculty to be by means of its representations the cause of reality of the objects of these representations*. *Pleasure* is the *representation of the agreement of an object or of an action with the subjective conditions of life*, i.e., with the faculty of the *causality of a representation with respect to the reality of its object*” (8).

Prior to his service on Covey's farm, Douglass was successively placed under three overseers on Colonel Lloyd's plantation: William Sevier, James Hopkins, and Austin Gore. His experience with each of the overseers deepened his understanding of the nature of law in its crucial entanglement with pleasure. The first overseer, Sevier, was a "cruel man"; he was misspelled yet "rightly named" as "Severe" in the *Narrative* (22). At this stage, no thought ever occurred to Douglass about the overseer's duty; Sevier just seemed to "take pleasure in manifesting his fiendish barbarity," to all appearances taking no account of what his office demanded (22). His voice stirred sheer terror in the slaves—"It was enough to chill the blood, and stiffen the hair of an ordinary man, to hear Mr. Sevier talk"—in a manner not unlike the Kantian voice of reason which is said to make even the boldest evildoer tremble, but such a comparison was simply unimaginable for the slave boy as he was completely overwhelmed by Sevier's "outburst of profanity," which adorned "nearly every sentence that escaped [the] compressed grating" of his teeth (*My Bondage* 182). "From the rising till the going down of the sun . . . cursing, raving, cutting, and slashing among the slaves of the field, in the most frightful manner," and making the field look like "the field of blood," Sevier thus embodied pure violence before any idea of law or duty came into play (*Narrative* 22; *My Bondage* 183).

Douglass was not long at Colonel Lloyd's before Sevier died and Hopkins took over the place. Unlike his predecessor, Hopkins exhibited "no extraordinary cruelty," and "when he whipped a slave, as he sometimes did, he seemed to take no special pleasure in it, but, on the contrary, acted as though he felt it to be a mean business" (*My Bondage* 183). At this point, Douglass became aware of a duty involved in the overseer's position. If he gave a slave a flogging, Hopkins didn't receive pleasure from it; he was simply



acceding to the demand made upon him by his duty in accordance with “the business-like aspect of Col. Lloyd’s plantation” (183). His definitive disconnection of his ‘public’ role from all his private inclinations enabled him to carry out, if reluctantly, his duty. Thus the second overseer led Douglass to intuit the existence of an abstract higher order that stood by itself, regardless of all personal considerations, and forced submission upon anyone, whether an overseer or a slave.

A secret liaison between duty and pleasure soon revealed itself, when Hopkins was replaced by Gore—no one knew why the second overseer remained in the position so short a time, and yet Douglass surmised that he “lacked the necessary severity to suit Colonel Lloyd” (*Narrative* 28). In his merciless cruelty towards the slaves, Gore may well be grouped together with Sevier. The third overseer, however, did not merely continue the first one’s brutal regime, temporarily interrupted by a short respite during the second one’s mild rule. Gore rather integrated the two opposing characteristics of his predecessors into the most perfected form of cruelty. The third overseer was not unlike the second in that both performed what they each perceived as his own duty. Yet, for the slaves, they belonged to diagonally opposite types of overseers, since “[w]hat Hopkins did reluctantly, Gore did with alacrity” (*My Bondage* 201). Whereas Hopkins carried out his job only with his inner conflict openly visible to anyone as he was divided between the duty imposed on him and his ineradicable aversion to it, Gore raised his duty into a perfect union with his personality: “When he whipped, he seemed to do so from a sense of duty, and feared no consequences. He did nothing reluctantly, no matter how disagreeable. . . . He was just the man for such a place, and it was just the place for such a

man. It afforded scope for the full exercise of all his powers, and he seemed to be perfectly at home in it” (*Narrative* 29-30).

Crucial to our understanding of Gore’s pertinence to Kantian ethics is that he did not exactly fulfill his duty driven by his “self-love” or by a desire for his own happiness, in anticipation that the faithful execution of duty should return some profit to him. What struck Douglass was rather the overseer’s apparently selfless rigidity, his relentless self-obliteration for his duty. Gore attained this selflessness precisely by making his duty part and parcel of himself. It was this total identification with the law that made Gore far more invincibly vicious than the commonplace, however brutal, types of overseers that Douglass had met so far: “He was an overseer; but he was something more. With the malign and tyrannical qualities of an overseer, he combined something of the lawful master” (*My Bondage* 200). With his lordly “air of independence,” and with his “most inflexible firmness and stone-like coolness,” Gore perfectly embodied the sternness of a Kantian law whose primary interest was to discharge a duty for the duty’s sake, independently of all other external considerations (*My Bondage* 200; *Narrative* 30). It is important to recall in this connection that for Kant, the law of freedom has an objective reality; the ‘fact’ of reason is one way in which such an objectivity manifests itself. In a comparable manner, Douglass observes that there was “a stern will, an iron-like reality, about this Gore” (*My Bondage* 200). If for Kant, however, a complete fitness of the will to the object of pure practical reason is an “ideal of holiness,” that is, “not attainable by any creature but is yet the archetype which we should strive to approach and resemble in an uninterrupted but endless progress,” Gore was a monstrous bodying forth of what should have remained an (extremely heinous and immoral for the slaves) ideal, with his

“stern will” attaining its supposedly unattainable object and his “iron-like reality” evincing the invincible palpability of the law (*Practical Reason* 71). Seen in this light, it comes as no surprise that Douglass never tired of stressing that Gore was “always at his post, never inconsistent” (*Narrative* 30). The overseer’s terrorizing, almost superhuman non-contradictoriness was illustrated by the ominous perfection of matching his deeds and his words: “His words were in perfect keeping with his looks, and his looks were in perfect keeping with his words. . . . He spoke but to command, and commanded but to be obeyed. . . . He never promised but to fulfill” (29-30). Gore was a demonically enlarged image of those overseers whose words were always backed up by the cowskins and hickory sticks they carried with them as their “constant companions” (*My Bondage* (187). A “terrible instrument” that “condenses the whole strength of the arm to a single point,” the cowskin appropriately symbolized the absolute power of an overseer and demonstrated the force of his order which was “literally a word and a blow,” and there was no other overseer whom a cowkin better became than Gore (188).

Thus maxims, which for Kant are no more than “subjective” practical rules that one regards as holding only for one’s own will, unless they are made compatible with “objective” practical “laws” that one recognizes as “holding for the will of every rational being” (hence Kant’s famous phrase first formulated in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* [1785]: “act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law”), designated for Gore a common ground (even if common only for slaveholders and overseers) on which his subjective condition achieved its full objectification: Gore was “acting always up to the maxim, practically maintained by slaveholders, that it is better that a dozen slaves suffer

under the lash, without fault, than that the master or the overseer should *seem* to have been wrong in the presence of the slave. *Everything must be absolute here*” (*Practical Reason* 17; *Groundwork* 31; *My Bondage* 200).

It should be noted that the picture becomes a little more complicated than this once we take into account Douglass’s bringing a Kantian voice of reason to bear on Gore’s cruel rule in the *Narrative*: the overseer was “obdurate enough to be insensible to the voice of a reproving conscience” (29). Like reason, in Kant, conscience makes an appearance in the form of voice. At one point in the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant in passing mentions conscience [*Gewissen*] as a “prosecutor” within every human being, which cannot be silenced (82). Then in *The Metaphysics of Morals* (1797), he puts forward the following definition of conscience: “conscience is practical reason holding the human being’s duty before him for his acquittal or condemnation in every case that comes under a law” (160). As this definition suggests, Kant conceptualizes conscience in terms of an “*internal court* in man,” and it is only a short step from the court metaphor to the personification of conscience as an “internal judge” that observes, threatens, and keeps in awe each human being (189). Once personified this way, conscience does not take long to assume its own voice:

[Conscience] follows [every human being] like his shadow when he plans to escape. He can indeed stun himself or put himself to sleep by pleasures and distractions, but he cannot help coming to himself or waking up from time to time; and when he does, he hears at once *its fearful voice*. He can at most, in extreme depravity, bring himself to heed it no longer, but he still *cannot help hearing it*. (189; emphases mine)

Thus conscience “speaks involuntarily and unavoidably,” and we hear what it says as involuntarily and unavoidably (161). Then, how can we fail to comply with the voice of conscience that we have no option not to hear? Kant’s answer is that an evil man can turn

a deaf ear to conscience even as he hears its “verdict” (161). (Note that a ‘verdict’ is not a command, so that it is up to his will whether he gives sufficient heed to it or not.) Our duty is “to sharpen [our] attentiveness to the voice of the inner judge, and to use every means to obtain a hearing for it” (161).

Kant’s diagnosis seems to a great extent applicable to Gore, who would not listen to “the voice of a reproving conscience.” Provided that we accept Kant’s position, however, what made the overseer so unmindful of the counsel of the inner judge in the first place? Kant offers an answer to this question in his discussion of the “radical evil” in *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793). Gore exemplifies a case of deliberate self-deception which Kant calls the “wickedness” or “corruption” of the human heart:

[It] is the propensity of the will to maxims which neglect the incentives springing from the moral law in favor of others which are not moral. It may also be called the *perversity* (*perversitas*) of the human heart, for it reverses the ethical order [of priority] among the incentives of a *free* will; and although conduct which is lawfully good (*i.e.*, legal) may be found with it, yet the cast of mind is thereby corrupted at its root (so far as the moral disposition is concerned), and the man is hence designated as evil. (25)

It is important to keep in mind that Kant distinguishes between the *legality* and the *morality* of an action. In *The Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant explains this distinction in the following words: “The mere conformity or nonconformity of an action with law, irrespective of the incentive to it, is called its *legality* (lawfulness); but that conformity in which the idea of duty arising from the law is also the incentive to the action is called its *morality*” (20; see also *Practical Reason* 69). In Gore’s case, the overseer’s conduct may be considered as legal in the sense that it conformed at least to an unwritten code of the community to which he imagined he belonged, if not to the statute laws of the existent municipality or a larger society, whereas its morality was obviously questionable. Gore

reversed the ethical order of priority among his incentives so that the incentives that induced his immoral actions prevailed over the “voice of a reproving conscience.”

The wickedness or perversity of the human heart is the third stage in Kant’s distinction of three degrees of the will’s capacity for evil. If we follow the same distinction a little further, Hopkins would be considered as being plagued with what Kant terms the “frailty (*fragilitas*) of human nature” (24). This is the first of the three stages, and refers to the case in which one fails to do good in spite of one’s will to do good, because the will yields to other incentives. Unlike Gore’s, Hopkins’s cast of mind was not wholly corrupt, since at least he willed to be good (or at least he was fully aware of the verdict of his conscience against himself); the problem was that his heart was too weak to realize the good. Although he might have adopted the good into the maxim of his will, his willpower was not up to that maxim.

Sevier’s case, on the other hand, poses a challenge to Kant’s schematization of man’s capacity for evil. The challenge mainly concerns the apparently complete absence of the idea of duty or law as a motivating force of his actions. Unlike Hopkins, Sevier did not fall into the first of the three degrees of the evil heart, since he showed no willingness to be good in the first place. Every fiber of his heart was so corrupted that the thought of duty never occurred to his mind. At the same time, this does not mean that his case can be readily categorized in the second of Kant’s three modes of evil, the “impurity” of the heart. In the second stage, the failure of morality is to be detected at a deeper level than the miscarriage of the maxim as in the first stage: the maxim adopted to the will is good, and the heart strong enough to carry it out, but the heart “stands in need of other incentives beyond this, in determining the will to do what duty demands” (25). In other

words, the heart is tainted with impure motives, even though the action that results may perhaps conform to the demand of duty. Sevier's cast of mind was, for one thing, not so much impure with mixed incentives as thoroughly corrupted at its root; and for another, there seemed to be no part for the sense of duty to play in it. And precisely for the latter reason, we are also left unsure about the applicability of the third stage, the wickedness of the human heart, to Sevier.<sup>80</sup>

The above argument indicates that a main source of the difficulty in reading Douglass in light of Kantian ethics is that whereas Kant presupposes the idea of duty directly arising from the moral law in such a way that neither the evil heart nor its consequential action is to be understood outside the parameters of a failure to comply with the call of duty, Douglass was not so certain about the nature of the idea of duty, much less about its precedence over other motives. In the Kantian view, indeed, the case of Sevier would bespeak a failure of morality on the overseer's part as well as a failure of recognition on Douglass's part; the slave boy was not perspicacious enough to penetrate through the overseer's mind to see a will to obey the moral law at work, even if it was completely overwhelmed by other immoral motives that set off his brutal actions.

A problem with a reading like this, however, is that it interprets Douglass's text too much in favor of Kantian philosophy to do justice to the ex-slave narrator's preoccupation with the theme of pleasure which repeatedly appears in his description of

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<sup>80</sup> Both Allison and Zupančič point out that the third stage refers to a fundamental self-deception that underlies both the first and the second stages of the evil heart rather than a difference in degree of the capacity for evil. In Zupančič's words, the third stage "*explains the possibility of the first two modes of evil, no more (or less)*. It does not refer to any empirical act, but to the root of all . . . non-ethical conduct. It is the precondition of the adoption of maxims other than those that come from the moral law" (89; see also Allison 159). If this is the case, the wickedness of the human heart holds true of all the three overseers (and even of every immoral action in the world).

the overseers' carrying out of their duties. In order to consider this matter, it should be pointed out first that Sevier's taking "pleasure" in his "fiendish barbarity" can be deemed as a kind of mythical construction that Douglass erected in order to call attention to an undeniable shadow of pleasure that accompanied the execution of 'duty' (duty not in the exact Kantian sense of something that immediately arises from the law of freedom, but in the more general sense of a lawfulness which binds us and in which we commits ourselves). For Douglass, the first overseer constitutes an original state of pure barbarity against which the other overseers' degrees of inhumanity are to be measured. In this sense, it is comparable to the hypothetical "state of nature," which Kant likens to "the scenes of unprovoked cruelty in the murder-dramas enacted in Tofoa, New Zealand, and the Navigator Islands, and the unending cruelty . . . in the wide wastes of northwestern America" (*Religion* 28).<sup>81</sup> Yet, Kant hastily excludes these instances of human cruelty from his consideration of reason's ability to follow duty, on the ground that his analysis is primarily leveled on the "civilized state," in which "human nature can better known" for "its predispositions can more completely develop" there (*Religion* 28). What Kant seems oblivious of is the possibility that human nature can more distinctly reveal its predispositions in the so-called state of nature than in the civilized state, even though his position is completely understandable given the premise of his argument that places human nature, especially reason, transcendently above mere nature. Thus the main difference between Kant's and Douglass's approaches to the mythical state of nature is that while one mentions it in order to delimit the proper realm of his investigation as

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<sup>81</sup> As Theodore Green and Hoyt Hudson, the editors of the English translation of Kant's *Religion*, suggest in a footnote, Kant's knowledge about these examples of "barbarity" in non-European societies was probably based on his reading Captain James Cook's journals of his three voyages made between the years 1768 and 1779.



distinguished from the outside that it constitutes, for the other the original state of pure barbarity is internal to every instance he takes up for examination. For Douglass, Sevier represents a primordial stage for the subsequent unfolding of slave-holding reason, in which pleasure is not yet precisely locatable as it is perfectly coextensive with bare barbarity.

Gore's case, meanwhile, can be more revealing about pleasure's role in the overseer's duty. In this respect, Douglass made an interesting remark in *My Bondage and My Freedom* (but not in the *Narrative*): Gore "needed no higher pleasure than was involved in a faithful discharge of the duties of his office" (200). This statement, whose resonance with Douglass's earlier remarks I have already quoted about Sevier's pleasure as well as about Hopkins's taking "no special pleasure" in whipping a slave naturally asserts itself, presents an ambiguity as to exactly how much pleasure Gore took in a discharge of his duty. We can, on one hand, interpret the remark as meaning that "to perform duty gave Gore only a minimum pleasure, but he was completely satisfied with that meager pleasure, since his disposition made him need no more pleasure than that." In this case, pleasure plays no or only an almost negligible part in the execution of duty. This interpretation well accords with the central import of Kantian ethics that a duty must be carried out for the duty's sake, not for a pleasure that accrues in the process or as a result of performing it. In other words, the Gore in this view expresses a so-called 'ascetic' tendency that runs through Kant's thinking to the letter.

The same sentence, on the other hand, can be read to the effect that "Gore took a considerable degree of pleasure in the discharge of his duties, so that he needed no other avenues to the satisfaction of his desire." Even this reading can be forced into the Kantian

framework, since Kant's and Gore's 'duty' were not exactly the same; for Kant, the true duty was to be identified in the aforementioned "voice of a reproving conscience" which Gore dared not to hear. In this case, Gore was a prey to a vicious self-deception on account of which he engaged himself in a false duty (and thus the third stage of the human capacity for evil is the case with Gore, as we have already seen). Not only was Gore's evil "radical" in that it "corrupt[ed] the ground of all maxims"; he also reached the apex of radical evil, or what Kant calls a "radical perversity in the human heart," by paying no attention whatsoever to "the motivating forces in the maxim but only to the observance of the letter of the law," thus failing to recognize what he took for the law in fact never qualified as a moral law (Kant, *Religion* 32-33). In other words, Gore violated Kantian ethics' "categorical imperative" ("[s]o act that the maxim of your will could always hold at the same time as a principle in a giving of universal law") in a fundamental manner, for he deceived himself into the belief that he was entitled to act as if his maxim could hold at the same time as a principle equal to universal law, although in reality the maxim had no claim whatever to universality (Kant, *Practical Reason* 28; see also *Groundwork* 31).

Yet, it needs to be pointed out that it is not as easy to distinguish true duty from false duty, or legitimate belief from self-deception, as Kant seems to suggest, since there is no *a priori* criterion of universality. As Allison puts it, "this is precisely the place where Kant's moral theory is attacked by critics who charge that virtually any maxim, if suitably formulated, can be made to pass the [universality] test" ("Reflections" 180). Allison's defense of Kant's moral psychology, on the ground that "immoral maxims appear to pass the universalizability test only because they ignore or obscure morally

salient features of a situation,” by no means provides a satisfactory answer, since the “morally salient features of a situation” are not so obvious as Allison argues (181). On the contrary, as Zupančič points out with the help of Althusser’s penetrating critique of ideology, “the salient or obvious features a situation, which are supposed to protect us from self-deception, can in fact involve the most refined form of self-deception. Every ideology works hard to make certain things ‘obvious,’ and the more we find these things obvious, self-evident and unquestionable, the more successfully the ideology has done its job (93). In a similar vein, Richard J. Bernstein maintains in his book on *Radical Evil* that Kant’s moral theory does not preclude the possibility that there are some persons who incorporate into their maxims the overpowering incentive to *defy* the moral law, insofar as, as Kant put it in *Religion*, “[t]he most rational mortal being in the world might still stand in need of certain incentives, originating in objects of desire, to determine his choice [*Willkür*]” (21). Our will, argues Bernstein, “may choose to defy the moral law. . . . We can choose to be perverse, we can choose to be devilish, we can choose to defy the moral law. . . . There are no *intrinsic* restraints on what the [will] can choose to do; we are ‘radically free’” (41-42).<sup>82</sup> Thus the difficulty with subjecting one’s maxim to the universality test remains unsolved. As I have already argued, this is one necessary consequence of the ambiguity involved in Kant’s conceptualization of the moral law as purely formal. The ambiguity is so internal to Kantian ethics that it presents itself whenever the exact nature of an (im)moral act is at stake.

Douglass’s remark about Gore’s (non-)pleasure in the carrying out of his duty constitutes a knot to unravel since one must question the very foundation of Kantian

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<sup>82</sup> I have replaced the Kantian term *Willkür* in the quotation from Bernstein with “will.” I will briefly discuss Kant’s distinction between *Willkür* and *Wille* in the next chapter.

ethics. To begin with, the question concerns the seemingly Kantian “voice of a reproving conscience.” It should be noted regarding this matter that in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass quits invoking the same figure and instead simply mentions Gore’s “freedom from moral restraint” (201). The change corresponds to the overall alterations newly made to the sequence describing Gore’s character in the second autobiography, of which the introduction of the reference to the overseer’s pleasure of duty is also part. Taken as a whole, these alterations indicate a slight but remarkable shift of emphasis. The “conscience” no longer makes appearance as a positive agent of moral censorship that persistently even if unsuccessfully reproves the subject with its “voice,” and its place is filled by the purely abstract “moral restraint,” whose function is limited to a strictly regulative role. Correspondingly, pleasure enters the scene as the reverse side of duty, establishing a thematic link with Hopkins’s “no special pleasure.” Whereas the word “pleasure” was employed in the *Narrative* to describe Sevier and in the negative mode Hopkins, but not Gore, in *My Bondage and My Freedom* pleasure appears primarily in conjunction with the overseers’ sense of duty. (Thus Douglass slightly more emphatically in the second autobiography than in the first underscores the mythical state of pure violence and brutality that Sevier represented for the slave boy, a state where no duty or even pleasure could not claim its own place since their contours were almost completely submerged in the surfeit of barbarity.) Through all these modifications, the emphasis is subtly shifted from Gore’s egregious disrespect for the voice of conscience to a tenuous complicity between law and pleasure that seemed at work as a driving force behind the overseer’s too exact discharge of his duty.

Significantly, the position delineated above does not remove Douglass as far away from Kant as it might seem. Rather, it evinces that Douglass shares a central concern with Kantian ethics, if not exactly with Kant's ethics.<sup>83</sup> The issue mainly turns on how the driving force required for an ethical act is to be conceptualized. As I have already mentioned, Kant considers that it is a respect [*Achtung*] for duty that motivates us to follow the moral law. The following words from the *Critique of Practical Reason* tellingly make the point: what induces us to perform our duty is a "respect for something quite different from life, something in comparison and contrast with which life with all its agreeableness has no worth at all. [Man] still lives only from duty, not because he has the least taste for living" (75). Kant then observes that "[t]his is how the genuine incentive [*echte Triebfeder*] of pure practical reason is constituted," and with this remark, he goes on to conclude the entire chapter on the "incentives of pure practical reason" (62-75). At the first sight, it seems that the above passage merely recapitulates Kant's 'ascetic' stance towards life and its pleasures. It is worthy of notice, however, how Kant introduces another driving force (*Triebfeder*) even while he severs duty from any other driving forces. This is as if even after stripping the moral law of all its external incentives, we would still discover a kernel that responds to a kind of pleasure beyond any 'natural' pleasures.

It is in this sense that we can argue, as Zupančič puts it, "Kantian ethics will not simply be an ethics of asceticism, of the renunciation of all pleasure on principle" (8).

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<sup>83</sup> Here I follow Allen Wood's distinction between *Kant's ethics* and *Kantian ethics*. The former is the moral philosophy plainly put forward in Kant's own writings. The latter is, on the other hand, an ethical theory "formulated in the basic spirit of Kant, drawing on and acknowledging a debt to what the author of the theory takes to be his insights in moral philosophy" (1).

Kant's discovery of the 'beyond' of the pleasure principle constitutes what Lacan considers as the "subversive core" of the German philosopher's work; for Lacan, Kant is not so much an advocate of the "voluntarism of Law-for-Law's sake" as a pioneering philosopher of the ethics of "do not give up on your desire" ("Kant with Sade" 646, 651; Zupančič 238).<sup>84</sup> It is important to keep in mind that Lacan's "desire" is *par excellence* that which is unrestrained by the pleasure principle, whose primary function is to *prevent* (not to promote) an excess of enjoyment which Lacan calls "*jouissance*." (Hence Lacan's distinction between pleasure and *jouissance*.) Kant engages with the issue of *jouissance* (pleasure beyond the pleasure principle) in his exploration for the *Triebfeder* of the moral law—only the problem with Kant is that he has inverted the actual order obtaining between the moral law and *jouissance*: the former is in fact a support of the latter, not vice versa (Lacan, *Ethics* 189). This explains why Kant needs to be read side by side with the Marquis de Sade, and why Lacan devoted one whole essay, titled "Kant with Sade," to this subject. Published eight years after the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Sade's *Philosophy in the Bedroom* "completes" Kant's text in the sense that it "yields the truth of the *Critique*." ("Kant with Sade" 646). Whereas Kant detects a painful pleasure behind the imperative that demands the discharge of duty for duty's sake, Sade carries the logic of painful pleasure to such an extreme that "[p]leasure, a rival of the will in Kant's

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<sup>84</sup> "Do not give up on your desire" is Zupančič's paraphrasing of Lacan's famous axiom, "*ne pas céder sur son désir*." In Dennis Potter's English translation of *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, in which this axiom appears, it is rendered as "[not] giving ground relative to one's desire" (321). Like Zupančič, Bruce Fink glosses the phrase as meaning that the analysand must learn not "to give up on his or her desire," not "to give in when it comes to his or her desire," or not "to let the Other's desire take precedence over his or her own" (206).

system that provides a stimulus, is . . . in Sade's work no more than a flagging [*défaillant*] accomplice" (652).

It comes as no surprise, then, that we find Sade's remark concerning the law and tyranny in his novel *Juliette* (1797-1801) to a great extent pertinent to one of the most invincible overseers Douglass ever met: "[t]yrants are never born out of anarchy. One only ever sees them rise up in the shadow of laws; they derive their authority from laws." (qtd. in Lacan, *Ethics* 221). As Horkheimer and Adorno puts it in an article titled "Juliette or Enlightenment and Morality" in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947), in which more than a decade ahead of Lacan they show how the eponymous anti-heroine of Sade's novel completes the Kantian project of enlightenment morality,<sup>85</sup> Juliette's procedure is "enlightened and efficient as she goes about her work of sacrilege. . . . She favors system and consequence. She is a proficient manipulator of the organ of rational thought" (94-95). While her virtuous sister Justine (the heroine of *Juliette's* accompanying novel, *Justine*) is a "martyr for the moral law," Juliette is a nightmarish incarnation of the Kantian doctrine of virtue that requires "self-control" and presupposes the "duty of apathy": "[i]n regard to self-control, her directions are at times related to Kant's as the special application is to its basic proposition" (95).<sup>86</sup> What Horkheimer and Adorno wrote

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<sup>85</sup> This does not mean, of course, that Lacan's view of Kant does not differ from Horkheimer and Adorno's. While the latter readily dismiss Kant's "fact of reason" as "a mere natural psychological fact," it is very unlikely that Lacan would accept such a facile judgment (94). This notwithstanding, Horkheimer and Adorno's point concerning *Juliette's* connection with Kantian moral philosophy is still pertinent to my argument.

<sup>86</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno quote a passage that includes the phrases "self-control" and "duty of apathy" from the Part II of Kant's *The Metaphysics of Morals*, entitled "Metaphysical First Principles of the Doctrine of Virtue." The cited passage is as follows: "Therefore virtue, to the extent that it is founded on inner freedom, also contains an affirmative commandment for me, which is to bring all his abilities and inclinations under its control [i.e., of reason], and therefore under self-control, which prevails over the

of Juliette remarkably holds true of the stern overseer in Douglass's autobiographies. Like Juliette, Gore was a despotic master precisely because he adhered to lawfulness and never lost self-control. They were siblings born out of the same Kantian paradigm of morality, in the aftermath of which, paradoxically in spite of the philosopher's plain claim, the moral law no longer stood independently of pleasure; rather, it found within itself a pleasure, however painful, that functioned as its driving force.

The above argument illuminates the question of how to interpret Douglass's statement that Gore "needed no higher pleasure than was involved in a faithful discharge of the duties of his office." Its ambiguity largely originates in the undecidability of the status of pleasure in Gore. Obviously, the overseer did not draw much pleasure in the common sense of the term from his execution of duty; he was of too 'stoical' a disposition to take an excess of enjoyment in any kind of engagement. In order to go about its work, on the other hand, Gore's stoicism itself required a driving force, which did not move him because it pleased him, but which nonetheless presented itself as an enjoyment beyond the pleasure principle. Seen in this light, the ambiguity of the sentence on which two contrastive interpretations are possible corresponds to the uncertain extent of the sphere of influence that the faculty of desire commands in Kant's philosophical system built around the keystone of the moral law.<sup>87</sup> Douglass's remark was a necessary

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negative commandment not to be ruled by one's emotions and inclinations [the duty of apathy]; because, unless reason takes the reins of government into its hand, emotions and inclinations will be in control" (qtd. in Horkheimer and Adorno 95; see *Metaphysics of Morals* 166).

<sup>87</sup> For Kant's definition of the 'faculty of desire' in relation to 'life' and 'pleasure,' see note 79 above. The primary cause for the ambiguity regarding the role pleasure plays in the determination of the will to duty is to be located in the will's uncertain relation with the "object of the faculty of desire." As Zupančič puts it, "if the will is determined by



equivocation employed to fully engage with the indefinite range of the Kantian moral heritage and to keep open the horizon of possibilities revealed by it, out of which both promising and devastating consequences could emerge.

This also implies that Gore's wickedness provided an ominous 'mirror image' for Douglass's own self-image as a slave seeking freedom, inasmuch as he had to stake his life on an abstract idea that turned into a supreme duty. For both the overseer and the slave, the most strenuous personal desire functioned in accordance with the law, supplying the driving force that set the subject in pursuit of the object of the law. Even so, there was a decisive difference between Gore and Douglass: while the slave's law was the law of freedom to the extent that his will willed its freedom as its object, freedom played no role in the overseer's law. Gore carried out his empty duty for duty's sake, and the emptiness in this case was by no means a free space of play but the deadening futility of mechanical rigidity. None of Gore's actions was an act of freedom insofar as they didn't follow the law of freedom. Rather, he acted purely according to a law of mechanical necessity and thereby turned himself into the very agent of that necessity, so that he could occupy the place of the untouchable Other. Hence his perfect congruency with the law, which would not happen with the law of freedom since the will's perfect realization of freedom is, as we have already seen, an "ideal of holiness." In contrast with Gore's law of necessity, Douglass's task was to turn freedom itself into a law of his own desire. He carried out this task through his repeated acts of resolving, as we shall see in the following chapter.

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such an object, which is external to duty itself, our conduct will never be anything other than pathological [*i.e.*, not motivated by the moral law alone]" (9).

## CHAPTER 3

### THE ACT OF FREEDOM

#### DOUGLASS'S RESOLVE TO RUN AWAY

In addressing the question of what was the act of freedom for Douglass, I have to point out, first of all, that in his conceptualization, it must be done out of one's own will. Douglass emphasized this point with his repeated use of the word "resolved" and other words of similar meaning. The word first appeared prior to the scene with the moving vessels on the Chesapeake, when he learned about the abolitionist movement in Baltimore: he "resolved to run away," as a result of hearing the advice of two unnamed sympathetic Irish stevedores on a wharf (44). A few pages later, Douglass was sent by boat to St. Michaels to live with Thomas Auld, in March, 1833. During the passage, while especially attentive to the routes other boats took, he renewed his vow: "[m]y determination to run away was again revived. I resolved to wait only so long as the offering of a favorable opportunity. When that came, I was determined to be off" (50). Douglass's final resolve to fight against the master should be seen in light of this repeated invocation of the power of the will.

It should not pass unnoticed that in emphasizing the power of willing, Douglass was once again in a position comparable to that of Kant. In the *Critique of Practical Reason*, Kant defines freedom as independent of the law of causality and extends this definition to include the will as a free will (26). The will is free, insofar as it is "thought as independent of empirical conditions and hence, as a pure will, as determined *by the mere form of law*" (28). As we have seen, this form of law is just another name for the moral law. The will has no other "determining ground" than the moral law (62), and as

such, it has no other law than a law of freedom. In other words, the will is a will to be free from natural necessity.

Likewise, Douglass invoked the power of the will to break away from what seemed to be a natural necessity. Southern slavery, the social institution in which he was born and raised, took on the guise of legitimate order, to such an extent that it seemed almost preordained by some transcendent, inevitable force, and as such, virtually comparable to the reign of nature. Typically, slaveholders justified their system of exploitation by recourse to the Will of God. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass recalls how he, as an infant, was haunted by the presence of someone who was often referred to as “old master” but still unknown. This was the first intimation of what it was to be totally at the mercy of some other person’s will: “I was A SLAVE—born a slave and though the fact was incomprehensible to me, it conveyed to my mind a sense of my entire dependence on the will of *somebody* I had never seen” (147). Although it was not long before the much dreaded “old master” turned out to be a mere overseer and the name lost its terrors, the same sense of total dependence on others’ will remained, only to be rekindled when he witnessed the flogging of Aunt Esther (Aunt Hester in the *Narrative*). He was now beset with such “perplexing questions” as “*Why am I a slave? Why are some people slaves, and others masters?*” *Was there ever a time this was not so? How did the relation commence?*” He put these questions to other slave children, who were slightly older and not much better acquainted than him. It was one of the first occasions that inaugurated his quest for coming to terms with the abstruse concept of God:

I learned . . . that “*God, up in the sky,*” made every body; and that he made *white* people to be masters and mistresses, and *black* people to be slaves. This did not satisfy me, nor lessen my interest in the subject. I was told, too, that God was good, and that He knew what was best for me, and best for everybody. This

was less satisfactory than the first statement; because it came, point blank, against all my notions of goodness. It was not good to let old master cut the flesh off Esther, and make her cry so. Besides, how did people know that God made black people to be slaves? Did they go up in the sky and learn it? or, did He come down and tell them so? All was dark here. . . . I could not reconcile the relation of slavery with my crude notions of goodness. (178-79)

Obviously, the slaves who concurred with a theory that condemned them to perpetual slavery were under the same “delusion,” which Douglass pointed out apropos of religious colored people, that “God requires them to submit to slavery, and to wear their chains with meekness and humility” (226). The basis of this religious doctrine was, of course, the Bible, from which white ministers commonly quoted the verses that admonished slaves “to be orderly and dependable workers devoted to their owner’s interests, to be satisfied with their station in life, to accept their stripes patiently, and to view their faithful service to earthly master as a service to God” (Blassingame 84).

Hence Douglass’s fierce attack on Christianity, or more specifically, as he put it in the “Appendix” to the *Narrative*, on “the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land” (97). Douglass knew a number of slaveholders who were at the same time devotees of Christianity, and this intimate knowledge led him to conclude that “of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst” (68). At St. Michael’s, Thomas Auld’s conversion to Methodist Christianity had no beneficial effect upon him; on the contrary, “it made him more cruel and hateful in all his ways; for I believe him to have been a much worse man after his conversion than before. Prior to his conversion, he relied upon his own depravity to shield and sustain him in his savage barbarity; but after his conversion, he found religious sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty” (52). Covey enjoyed the reputation for being a first-rate slave breaker by virtue of, rather

than despite, his being “a professor of religion—a pious soul—a member and a class-leader in the Methodist church” (54). For Douglass, Covey epitomized the self-deceptive nature of Southern Christianity: the slave breaker “would make a short prayer in the morning, and a long prayer at night; and strange it may seem, few men would at times appear more devotional than he. . . . he sometimes deceived himself into the solemn belief, that he was a sincere worshipper of the most high God” (57). After his term with Covey was over, Douglass was hired out to William Freeland during 1835. Unlike Covey, Freeland was not a religious master, but Douglass found himself in the midst of a community of “religionists.” Douglass cites two ministers as specimens of those “merciless, *religious* wretch[es]” who applied an equal degree of zeal to practicing their religion and to whipping slaves—even in advance of deserving it, in one case (69). Now, without the slightest hesitation, Douglass could declare that “the religion of the south is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes,—a justifier of the most appalling barbarity,—a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds,—and a dark shelter under, which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal deeds of slaveholders find the strongest protection” (68).<sup>88</sup>

Thus, Douglass was convinced that in the South the slave’s will was intercepted in the name of God’s Will. In the regime that pretended to represent the divine will and

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<sup>88</sup> This judgment was shared by many other slave narrators. In the *Narrative of William W. Brown* (1847), for example, Wells Brown observed that “in Missouri, and as far as I have any knowledge of slavery in the other States, the religious teaching consists in teaching the slave that he must never strike a white man; that God made him for a slave; and that, when whipped, he must not find fault,—for the Bible says, ‘He that knoweth his master’s will, and doeth it not, shall be beaten with many stripes!’ And slaveholders find such religion very profitable to them” (410). In a similar vein, Henry Box Brown remarked in his *Narrative* (1851) that “the religion of the slave-holder is everywhere a system of mere delusion, got up expressly for the purpose of deceiving the poor slaves, for everywhere the leading doctrine in the slave-holder’s religion is, that it is the duty of the slave to obey his master in all things” (69).

made no recognition even of volitional freedom on the part of those who it kept enchaind, for the latter to be free in their own power of the will, to will independently of the “natural necessity” that this regime imposed upon them, was a critical step. At the same time, while Douglass’s stress on the power of his will might suggest a heroic figure with an extraordinarily strong resolve, an examination of Douglass’s text reveals that it tells a more complicated story than that. As we have already seen, Douglass’s apostrophe to the moving sloops on the Chesapeake was “compelled” by his thoughts, in which what role his will played was uncertain, even if the subject of enunciation—that is, the subject who supposedly had the will to enunciate—emerged in the very act of enunciation. In the same way, it was unclear whence his will sprang in the course of the subsequent apostrophic exposition of his thoughts. In the first half of the soliloquy, Douglass lamented his fate as a slave, and in so doing conceded that he was totally depending on the Other’s will: “O God, save me! God, deliver me! Let me be free!” This was immediately followed by the phase of violently questioning the divine intention (“Is there any God? Why am I a slave? Let me be free! Is there any God? Why am I a slave?”), and then out of the blue, as if compelled by the very force of enunciation, Douglass leaped into the act of willing, refusing to pass on what remained of his will to some other indefinite being: “I will run away. I will not stand it. Get caught, or get clear, I’ll try it. I had as well die with ague as the fever. I have only one life to lose. I had as well be killed running as die standing. Only think of it; one hundred miles straight north, and I am free! Try it? Yes!” Lastly, as if on second thought, lest he might sound too arrogant and solipsistic, for fear he might sound too boldly neglecting or even challenging the divine

will, he added a qualification to the declaration of his resolve: “God helping me, I will” (59).

This account invites the question of what ultimately determined Douglass’s will. If the thoughts governed the will, there must be something that predisposed the thoughts to willing, which means the determining condition of the will is still left unexplained. In other words, the will had a dark spot that drove him to will, but that dark spot never appeared as such in Douglass’s account, as a positive entity (the will) covered the pure negativity. To that extent, there was no hero who could claim the power of the will all to himself. This is not to argue that the power of the will or the agent of willing that occupied the central position in the scene was illusory and in reality nonexistent. Rather, Douglass complicates the common conception of the will—according to which there should always be the subject who wills, and in him the willpower that motivates him, prior to his act—with what we may call the “dialectic of the will.” Instead of being the prior condition for an act, the will arises in the very instant of (the act of) willing, emerging from within an irreducible tension between the one who in the next moment turns into the subject of willing and the Other (in this particular case, God). In this sense, Douglass’s solitary speech replicates, at the level of the statement, what happened at the level of the enunciation; just as he jumped into an act of free willing precisely with his utterance, as a result of the exchange between him and the Other (the idea of freedom) materialized on a white screen, his declaration of resolve involved two separate entities and a leap, made in their interstice, into an act of willing. Only the difference is that the will was openly pronounced to be the prime mover in the latter, while in the former it was not.

## TWO PRELIMINARY RESOLVES

We have seen at length the sequence that leads from Douglass's witnessing of a multitude of moving ships on the Chesapeake Bay to his monologue in which he (once again) resolved to be free—one of those sequences he reprinted in full in both *My Bondage and My Freedom* and the *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass*—because it foreshadows what takes place in the scene that follows. Douglass's confrontation with Covey reenacts the fundamental structure of the dialectic of the will we have considered above. As Douglass puts it, “[t]he circumstances leading to the change in Mr. Covey’s course toward me form an epoch in my hungry history. You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man” (60). This “epoch” was prepared in the foregoing acts of resolve. This is not to suggest, however, that these acts of resolve necessarily and without deviation led to the final resolve to fight with Covey. On the contrary, Douglass moved towards it, as it were, in fits and starts, of which not a few miscarried. This was partly because the time and situation were not ripe enough for a decisive action, but first and foremost because although Douglass resolved to be free from the system of necessity called slavery, this resolution did not spell out what he should do to attain freedom. As we have seen, this is exactly parallel to the paradox—and for many, the dilemma—in Kant’s moral law: reason teaches me to follow the moral law, but I don’t know what the moral law orders me to do in particular, since it has no content, and I must decide what I should do for myself, to the best of my ability.

Douglass documents a misfiring of resolution that the ambiguity inherent in the Kantian formal injunction to be free was significantly responsible for. The incident happened about one or two months after his term with Covey reached its halfway point,



by which time, as Douglass tells us, the master had succeeded in completely “breaking” his slave. It was one of the hottest days in August, and Douglass was being engaged in fanning wheat with other men, when he collapsed, “seized with a violent aching of the head, attended with extreme dizziness” (60). Finding Douglass prostrate by the side of a fence, Covey twice gave him a “savage kick in the side” and demanded that he get up. Each time, in attempting to follow the order, Douglass staggered and fell down. Upon seeing this, Covey snatched up a hickory slab and struck him “a heavy blow upon the head, making a large wound, and the blood ran freely.” At this point, we encounter two instances of Douglass’s resolve: first, “I made no effort to comply [with Covey’s order to get up], *having now made up my mind* to let him do his worst,” and second, “[a]t this moment I *resolved*, for the first time, to go to my master, enter a complaint, and ask his protection” (61; emphasis mine). The first was a purely passive resolve, a resolve to acquiesce in his fate which he was compelled to accept by physical necessity, and as such, it cannot be considered as a free choice. At the same time, to the extent that it involved setting his mind on disregarding the master’s order, which should invite further trouble, or even death, it was still a resolve, however forced. In fact, Douglass was here caught between two kinds of necessity, one natural (he had no physical power to do as the master demanded) and the other mandated by a social norm, in this case each contradicting the other. This impasse gave him a minimum space for his volitional leap, for the will to decide its course,—so narrow a space that even the biggest leap to be taken there was almost indistinguishable from being simply driven by natural necessity—and yet, this small leap primed him for the second, greater leap to the opposite direction.

In the interval between the first and the second resolve, Douglass had restored some strength. He was now released, at least comparatively, from the unyielding condition that had forced him to assent to his fate. Thus having gained a degree of independence from physical necessity, he made the second resolve. Yet, this resolution to make an appeal to the sentiment of his legal owner proved an injudicious decision. This was completely predictable, considering that Thomas Auld was the very one who had sent his intractable slave to the breaker. At the same time, Douglass had an adequate reason for his decision, since no slaveholder liked the idea of losing his human chattel, and Douglass was faced with a sheer threat to his life: “[t]he blood was yet oozing from the wound on my head. For a time I thought I should bleed to death” (61). Moreover, aside from the slaveholder’s mercenary calculations, Douglass, who was “covered with blood” from head to toe and presented “an appearance enough to affect any but a heart of iron,” could count on the common sentiment of human sympathy (62). This expectation was, however, utterly disappointed when he made an appearance before his master. Though apparently initially moved by the sight of a bondsman in gory shreds and tatters, Auld ridiculed Douglass’s contention that “as sure as I lived with Mr. Covey again, I should live with but to die with him; that Covey would surely kill me; he was in a fair way for it,” and then threatened to whip him if he bothered his master with any more complaints (62). Denied outright the protection he had sought from his master, Douglass trudged back to Covey’s in the next morning, “wearied in body and broken in spirit” (62).

This incident demonstrates the extent to which the central ambiguity in the Kantian moral law can bring an unexpected consequence. What came first and foremost in Douglass’s resolve was the will to be free, and this did not prescribe what he should do in

any concrete manner, so that in putting it into action, he loaded the empty form of resolution, as it were, with an inappropriate content, thus inviting its miscarriage. It was not until the next opportunity for his resolve cropped up, when he made up his mind to fight against Covey, that Douglass saw his will to be free fully realized in an act.

The greatest irony in the above episode was, however, that the second resolve was the only case in which there was, at least seemingly, some room left for the 'free will' to come into play, as opposed to both the previous, passive one, which was necessitated by his physical debilitation, and the subsequent resolve to resist Covey, concerning which Douglass never failed to stress, "from whence came the spirit I don't know," even as there continued considerable physical constraints imposed upon his free will throughout the sequence during which all the three cases of resolution took place; and that this notwithstanding, it was only in the second resolve that Douglass met plain bafflement, while the first one incited no active response from Covey ("Mr. Covey had now left me to my fate"), and the last one led to the well-known "turning-point" in his life (64, 61, 65). It was as if the moment some freedom of choice seemed available to him, Douglass was deeper intertwined in the vortex of necessity. In other words, even as Douglass expressly emphasizes the will's power to resolve on an action that runs against the course prescribed by some external necessity, his narrative complicates this picture of free will against causal necessity by showing how deeply his will was penetrated by physical causality. The episode of Douglass's failed appeal to his master, where what he did for the sake of freedom proved to be a further entrapment in necessity, prefigured the reverse movement in Douglass's confrontation with Covey, where necessity turned into freedom at a certain point difficult to locate.

More importantly, the misfiring of Douglass's resolution prior to the fight with Covey illuminates an unbridgeable gap between resolving and acting. Douglass's remark in *My Bondage and My Freedom* concerning his determination on carrying out a run-away plot a few years after his term with Covey, that "[i]t was easy to resolve, but not so easy to act," is quite pertinent here (315). Although to determine his mind upon being free was indispensable to winning his freedom, it turned out to be not a sufficient condition—insufficient for the attainment not only of the form of freedom (his socially recognized status as a free citizen) but also of the "fact" of his freedom. In other words, the mind's act of resolving *per se* was not an act of freedom for Douglass. As I will show later, Douglass's description of his existential transformation as a result of the fight makes this point clearer, pace Kant's delimitation of freedom as pertaining to the mind alone. But before moving on to discuss the battle in question, I will briefly examine a noteworthy scene that precedes it below.

### **THE MAGIC ROOT**

Upon reaching Covey's, Douglass was chased by the breaker, who was eager to give him another flogging. Luckily, before Covey could catch up with him, Douglass managed to flee into the cornfield, thus balking the chaser. At this point, Douglass parenthetically comments, "[m]y behavior was altogether unaccountable" (63). This construction, which did not reappear in his later autobiography, is remarkably ambiguous: was his behavior unaccountable to himself, or to Covey? The former seems more likely, given that Douglass had no choice but to go back to Covey in any case; he was well aware that there was no point in putting off what should necessarily come sooner or later. At the same time, it needs to be pointed out that this was precisely the perspective which

slavery adopted and took pains to make sure slaves would accept; from the standpoint of slaveholders, Douglass's behavior was a futile evasion, hence altogether unaccountable, and it appeared as such to him only when he agreed to place himself in that standpoint. Perhaps, then, the ambiguity in this remark originated from the suspension of his own standpoint in relation to that deployed by slavery in the name of (natural) necessity. Douglass never actively embraced slavery's viewpoint, and yet he certainly left room for people to conjecture that he secretly identified himself with it. This might be the reason why he refrained from making a similar observation in his later autobiographies.

Even so, it is important to note the way Douglass's invocation of the 'unaccountable' anticipated what took place shortly after. Now he concealed himself in the adjoining woods, caught on the horns of a dilemma: "to go home and be whipped to death, or stay in the woods and be starved to death" (63). He found himself helplessly entrapped between two seemingly inevitable courses of events, both of which should lead to death. There seemed no way out from this predicament, but a temporary break was offered from an unexpected quarter, when he happened upon Sandy Jenkins, who "professed to believe in a system for which I have no name. He was a genuine African, and had inherited some of the so called magical powers, said to be possessed by African and eastern nations" (*My Bondage* 280). Jenkins took the distressed slave to his home, and presented a root to him, saying "if I would take some of it with me, carrying it *always on my right side*, [it] would render it impossible for Mr. Covey, or any other white man, to whip me" (63). At first, not surprisingly, Douglass declined the offer. He was too perceptive to buy readily into such a superstitious belief; as he put it in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, "all this talk about the root, was, to me, very absurd and ridiculous, if not

positively sinful” (281). Moreover, as we have seen, his previous disillusionment with Southern Christianity predictably put him on his guard against all religious shams, even if they were of an African variety. With his “positive aversion to all pretenders to ‘divination,’” it is little wonder that Douglass turned a deaf ear to the conjuror’s counsel (*My Bondage* 281). Nevertheless, Jenkins persisted in urging, “with much earnestness,” Douglass to carry the root with him, on the grounds that “it could do no harm, if it did no good” (63). The conjuror had another compelling argument in store to shake the obstinate unbeliever’s conviction immensely: “[m]y book learning,’ he said, ‘had not kept Covey from me’ (a powerful argument just then)” (*My Bondage* 281). Eventually, Douglass agreed to take the root with him, but with a disclaimer—“to please him, rather than from any conviction of its excellence,” and following Jenkins’s advice, immediately went back to Covey’s (*My Bondage* 281). Fortunately, it was Sunday morning, and when Douglass by the yard gate met Covey and his wife on their way to church, they were both dressed up in their Sunday best and, oddly enough, looked “as smiling as angels.” Against all expectations, Covey spoke amiably to the slave who had without leave absented himself from work for two days; instead of hurling words of censure at him, he told him to drive the pigs from a lot nearby, and walked away to the church. At this point, Covey was, by all appearances, an “altered man,” as Douglass put it (*My Bondage* 282).

This curious incident fulfilled, in an unexpected way, Douglass’s earlier, seemingly not quite in place but obliquely prophetic intimation of the ‘unaccountable.’ The turn of events left Douglass in wonder:

this singular conduct of Mr. Covey really made me begin to think that there was *something* in the root which Sandy had given me; and had it been on any other day than Sunday, I could have attributed the conduct to no other cause than the

influence of that root; and as it was, I was half inclined to think the root to be *something* more than I at first had taken it to be. (63; emphasis mine)

The ‘unaccountable’ resurfaced in the charmed magic root as *something*, as if its indeterminate force were transmitted by way of some underground channel. In *My Bondage and My Freedom*, Douglass was more positively skeptical of the power of the root in tone, concluding his revised account of the same event with the assertion that “the *Sabbath*, and not the *root*, was the real explanation of Covey’s manner” (282). In effect, Douglass’s second autobiography eliminated the possibility that there was *something* unaccountable in the root. Yet, in compensation, as it were, for the loss of this indeterminate element, Douglass in the revised description located the indeterminacy in the figure of Sandy Jenkins, or perhaps more precisely, in the interstice between the conjuror and himself: “I saw in Sandy too deep an insight into human nature, with all his superstition, not to have some respect for his advice; and perhaps, too, a slight gleam or shadow of his superstition had fallen upon me” (281). Regarding this elusive remark, Paul Gilroy has perceptively pointed out that “[i]n view of the fact that Douglass makes such great use of the symbolism of light and darkness, the construction ‘gleam or shadow’ is an interesting evasion. Was it a gleam or a shadow? The two ideas are clear alternatives with strikingly different implications for our reading of the episode” (62). As I have already indicated, Douglass typically employed the symbolism of light and darkness in such a way that these figures were pushed to an extreme point at which the opposites somehow converged. In the episode about the black conjuror, likewise, he pressed the customary figure of ‘insight’ to “too deep” an extreme, at which point insight and blindness, and gleam and shadow, were simultaneously separate and continuous in a manner not dissimilar to the two sides of the Moebius strip. In this sense, the locution

“gleam or shadow” was not just an evasion; that was Douglass’s way of resisting the binary opposition between black and white that formed a conceptual basis of the ideology and institution of slavery. With that phrasing, he kept alive the core of indeterminacy that motivated him to take the root and face the breaker, the indeterminacy that informed the whole singular turn of events—the *something* which a ‘reasonable’ point of view (which meant, essentially, reasonable to the slaveholding class) would readily wipe out—without at the same time mystifying it. The “slight gleam or shadow of superstition” that passed over from the conjuror to the still unconvinced slave stopped short of assuming the body of a mystic agent, insofar as what mattered was not so much either of the two alternative readings *per se* as the irreducibility of the very gap between the two.

#### **BATTLE WITH COVEY**

Thus, when Douglass came into the fight with Covey early Monday morning—he never tired of stressing he was called to work “long before daylight” on that day—the sense of something unaccountable still lingered in the dark twilight air. The *Narrative* particularly intensified this sense by narrating the whole series of events—beginning with Covey’s merciless kicks and blows upon Douglass’s enfeebled body two days before and leading up to the battle—as it were, in one breath, without starting a new line. (The case was a little different in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, as we will briefly see later.) Douglass was at work in the stable, standing on a ladder throwing down fodder from the loft, when Covey came in, seized him by the legs, and tried to tie him with a rope. Upon seeing what the breaker was up to,

*I gave a sudden spring, and as I did so, he holding to my legs, I was brought sprawling on the stable floor. Mr. Covey seemed now to think he had me, and could do what he pleased; but at this moment—from whence came the spirit I don’t*



*know—I resolved to fight; and, suiting my action to the resolution, I seized Covey hard by the throat; and, as I did so, I rose.* (64; emphasis mine)

It is important to note how Douglass's "sudden spring" that starts the above quoted sequence prefigures the decisive "resolve" a few lines later. (Significantly, there is no mention of such a spring, and he did not make a resolve at this moment, in *My Bondage and My Freedom*.) With the statement "I gave a sudden spring," Douglass emphatically stressed the power of 'I,' an initiating force that sprung within 'I,' prophetically announcing the rise of a subject who had the ability to initiate things independently. This is not to say that Douglass was the one who began the fight; such an argument completely runs counter to the facts as well as to what the narrator meant. The fact is, the spring was made only as a counter move against Covey's assault, an act utterly necessitated by the course of events. Even so, there was in the statement some positive affirmation of an independent force of 'I'—paradoxically, at the same time departing from and inextricably embedded in the necessity of circumstances—that foreshadowed the emergence of a subject with the power to resolve.

Just like his sudden spring a few instants before, Douglass's resolve to fight was made on the spur of the moment. Sent sprawling on the floor, Douglass was now at the mercy of Covey—at least seemingly; the image of a master, with a rope in his hand, looking down on a fallen slave almost automatically conveys the idea of how unavoidable it was that the bondsman should surrender to the master. The surrender was not so much predetermined by the actual disparity of their physical—or we might say, 'natural'—strengths as by established social norms, in breach of which it was customarily justified, and even mandatory, for the master to punish the slave. Faced with the entrenchment of such social norms, however, what Douglass did next moment was a leap away from this

anterior causal condition by resolving to fight against the master (to put it precisely, the one by proxy). It is important to stress that this leap was not one back into the ‘natural order of things’ in which ‘the stronger will always win,’ even though Douglass actually prevailed over Covey in physical strength. Rather, his parenthetical remark “from whence came the spirit I don’t know” indicates that the resolution emerged, as it were, *ex nihilo*, and hence without regard to any kinds of necessity except its own. We may say that Douglass’s resolve was a free act, but that he was carried into this free act by some stream of necessity whose origin he didn’t understand.

In order to elaborate the point I have discussed above, it would be worth comparing Douglass’s resolve to fight with what Kant calls a “causality through freedom” (*Critique of Practical Reason* 88). By this phrase, Kant means transcendental freedom of the will as a causality which is determined exclusively by the moral law, and not by antecedent causal conditions: in Kant’s own words, “the *determination of the will* . . . through the law alone without any other determining ground connects the concept of causality to conditions quite other than those which constitute natural connection” (59). This idea of causality of freedom is first formulated when Kant proposes what he calls the Third Antinomy of Pure Reason (*i.e.*, the antinomy of freedom) in the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781). Kant argues that freedom is a different type of causality from “[c]ausality according to the laws of nature” (405). We can see some parallelism between Douglass’s resolve and Kant’s example of the ideal situation of the free will, in which a man rises from his chair “with perfect freedom, without the necessary determining influence of natural causes” (*Pure Reason* 410). Strictly speaking, of course, there is a notable difference of emphasis between the Kantian “causality through freedom” and Douglass’s

case. In Kant, the ultimate point of reference is always the moral law, through which, as we have already seen, the idea of freedom reveals itself.<sup>89</sup> What was at stake in Douglass, on the other hand, was obviously not the moral law *per se*; if he was at all concerned with the moral law, it was to the extent that the idea of freedom, which he had previously resolved to realize, depended on it. Even so, insofar as for Kant, the necessity that the moral law, which is also the “law of the pure will,” expresses consists only in “the formal conditions of the possibility of a law in general” (31), it is possible to establish a common denominator between them in the irreducible necessity solely commanded by the Other (which is the moral law in Kant, and the “spirit” of resolve in Douglass), just as we can find a similarity between the Kantian sublime and Douglass’s description of the moving sloops on the Chesapeake Bay.

For Kant, the moral law represents the ultimate horizon where the subject is stripped of all his “pathological”<sup>90</sup> motives and left with something which still demands obedience; and the subject is free when he chooses to follow such an irreducible remnant of lawfulness and necessity. Kant’s formula “causality through freedom” expresses this paradoxical idea. It is important to note here that the paradox does not appear as such if the subject remains entrapped in the illusion of what Kant calls “psychological freedom,” which blinds the subject to how what at first glance seems to be a free action is

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<sup>89</sup> The Kant scholar Henry Allison summarizes the point, saying “in the *Critique of Practical Reason* at least, Kant consistently maintains that the move is from the moral law to freedom” (*Kant’s Theory of Freedom* 245).

<sup>90</sup> As the English translator of the *Critique of Practical Reason* explains in a footnote, Kant uses “pathological” not in the sense of “unhealthy” or “morbid” as one might expect, but in the sense of “dependent upon sensibility” (17). It is important to keep in mind, therefore, that all our ordinary motives determined by sensible objects of desire, as opposed to the intelligible object of reason (namely, the moral law), are for Kant, “pathological.”

determined by “pathological” incentives (81). It is for this reason that, as Zupančič puts it, “where the subject believes herself autonomous, Kant insists on the irreducibility of the Other, a causal order beyond her control” (28). In order to be free in the Kantian sense, the subject must go beyond the fond and facile belief that he is free to choose and discover within himself the core of ‘natural necessity’ that governs his ‘free’ actions. At this ultimate point, the subject experiences a causality through freedom in its barest form: “[p]aradoxically, it is at the very moment when the subject is conscious of being carried along by the stream of natural necessity that she also becomes aware of her freedom” (Zupančič 27).

Just as the Kantian moral subject is conscious of his freedom precisely when he experiences the pressure of the irreducible Other, Douglass felt himself as a free subject to such a degree that he could declare with assurance that he “resolved to fight” (instead of, *e.g.*, he “was forced to fight”), at the very moment when the “spirit” visited him, as it were, from an uncharted realm of his mind and carried him along into the resolve like a stream of necessity. At the same time, the triumphant assertion of the freedom of his will articulated by the declaration of the resolve tempts us to question whether he was not still caught in what remained of the ruse of psychological freedom. It was not improbable that a similar doubt did occur to Douglass, who never tired of delving into his own experience for the ultimate ground of his sense of freedom, and who was acutely aware of the extent to which the slave’s will was determined by that of the master in a world where the ideology of slaveholders, with Southern Christianity as its aide, prevailed. That might have been part of the reason why he substantially revised the whole sequence that centered on his resolve to fight with Covey in *My Bondage and My Freedom*.

But it should be noted that Douglass's revision was probably necessitated by the destabilization of the status of the will in relation to its supposedly consequent act. Douglass's resolve to fight complicates the Kantian privileging of the will as the paramount agent of the moral law—from which the delusion of psychological freedom is just a step away—with its emphasis on its accompanying irreducible dimension of the act. As I have already argued, Douglass prized the power of the will in such a way that he made the repeated phrase “I resolved . . .” a central crux of his narrative. On this point, he was not far off from Kant, who advanced the litmus test for a moral action in the following words: “ask yourself whether, if the action you propose were to take place by a law of the nature of which you were yourself a part, you could indeed regard it as possible through your will” (60). For Kant, the move is always from the moral law and the (free) will to the moral action. However, Douglass's *Narrative* abundantly shows that such a criterion of moral action solely in terms of the will was not always satisfactory. For instance, both his resolves to seek protection from Covey in his master and to fight against the slave breaker seemed to meet the Kantian standard of moral action, as far as his will was concerned; nevertheless, why did they entail diametrically opposite consequences? Zupančič astutely points out that Kant's “making the coincidence of the will with the Law the condition of an ethical act,” and his corresponding identification of the subject with the will originate from his failure to recognize “the alienation of the subject in the act, an alienation which implies that the subject is not necessarily the *hero* of ‘his’ act” (100-01). To be sure, Douglass unmistakably posed himself as the hero of his act (both in the resolve to fight and in the actual fighting), thus exultantly celebrating the convergence of the subject in the act, but precisely this gesture enabled him to call into

question, even if only incidentally, the accepted continuum of the subject and the will (as symptomatically indicated by the advent of the objectified spirit of resolve) and the presupposed primacy of the will over the act.

At first glance, Douglass may seem to be wholeheartedly endorsing the will's precedence over the act. In fact, two opposite moments coexist in his account, one openly claiming the act's total dependency on the will, and the other subverting this claim, as it were, not in letter but in spirit. Douglass confirms a direct causal relationship from the will to the act by placing the resolve to fight before his physical movement. First, he made a leap in his mind with the resolve; then came his bodily act of rising, with his hands grabbing Covey by the throat. And yet, as if he suddenly became aware of a glaring gap between the will and the act that this account cannot conceal, Douglass parenthetically puts the formulaic-sounding phrase "suiting my action to the resolution" between the two phases. Closely examined, however, Douglass's assertion becomes problematic since the 'suiting the action to the resolution' itself involves another act of willing, unless the first willing already includes the second, insofar as the act is predicated upon the will. If, as Douglass suggests, the will directly translates into the act, this transition is not automatically completed, but the act of making the act adequate to the will itself must be willed. It follows from this that we will have an act of willing behind each attempt to make the act adequate to the will *ad infinitum*. Between the will and the act opens a gap, such that any attempt to make some smooth transition from the one to the other, without jumping over it once and for all, look possible ends in introducing just another gap. Thus, we may say that Douglass's 'suiting the action to the

resolution' does not so much bridge as cover a perpetual dieresis between the will and the act.

Douglass might have been well aware of such a paradox surrounding the causality of the will and the act which plagued his account of the resolve to fight, and probably that was partly responsible for the fact that he relocated the resolve at an earlier point—in the respite of Covey's cruelty on Sunday when he had ample time to reflect upon his own fate—and dropped the phrase “suiting my action to the resolution” in his second autobiography. It is worth pointing out here that Douglass's resolve to fight in the *Narrative* and his resolve to defend himself in *My Bondage and My Freedom* did not only differ in the degree of aggression that each implies with its content and the terms in which it was couched, but were essentially different kinds of resolution. Like his many other determinations, Douglass's resolve on self-defense in his revised autobiography was a resolution by and in itself, promising to accomplish an act in the future but independent of the promised act at the moment the resolve was made. Thus this type of resolution can be readily distilled into its 'form' (the resolve as a formal exercise of the free willpower) as distinguished from its 'content' that defines the consequent act ('to defend oneself,' in this case), and fits in the Kantian framework that presupposes the will's necessary anteriority to the act without difficulty.

By contrast, Douglass's resolve to fight in his first slave narrative was not just a resolution but was simultaneously accompanied by and hence inseparable from its consequent act. As in other cases of his resolve, the situation in which he was placed considerably delimited what he was able and had to do, and yet, unlike other cases, it demanded him to carry out an act *on the spot*, and precisely this immediacy was the

conclusive factor that ‘inversely’ (because the ‘usual’ order is from the determination of the content of the will to putting it into practice) decided the content of his resolve. When he resolved to fight, Douglass had ‘no choice,’ in the most literal sense possible, as to its content. (We can imagine, to be sure, a case in which he chose, for instance, *to forbear*, instead of to fight. But in that case the just mentioned immediacy did not come into play, and therefore his choice was not exactly of the same type of resolution as that of the resolve to fight.) In this sense, the phrase “I resolved to fight” is a complete formula that cannot be broken down into its elements, into its form and content. Without its content, this particular resolve cannot stand alone as a formal remnant of willpower.

The above argument amounts to saying that Douglass’s resolve at this juncture was indivisible from the act of fighting. The will and the act were one and the same thing in this instance. This not only suggests that the form of resolution coincidentally found its perfect content in the act, but that the resolve itself already involved a dimension of the act within itself. At the very moment when he resolved to fight, Douglass found himself already thrown into the act. In view of this, the formula “I resolved to fight” is comparable to what J. L. Austin famously named a “performative utterance,” or for short, “a performative.” According to Austin, the uttering of a performative is the doing of an action, rather than simply describing or reporting something. One of Austin’s examples of the performative is “I do,” as uttered by the bridegroom in the marriage ceremony to mean that “I take this woman to be my lawful wedded wife”: “[w]hen I say, before the registrar or altar, &c., ‘I do,’ I am not reporting on a marriage: I am indulging in it” (5-6). If we follow Austin’s grouping of performatives, Douglass’s “I resolved to fight” should be most appropriately classified as a “commissive”—an utterance that “commit[s] the



speaker to a certain course of action,” and this category includes such examples as “promise,” “am determined to,” “declare my intention,” and “dedicate myself to” (157-58). As Austin hastens to remind us, however, “[d]eclarations of intention differ from undertakings” (158). Indeed, the question of the failed promise—and more generally, that of failed speech act—whether it is “void, or given in bad faith, or not implemented,” ails Austin’s attempt to define performatives from the outset (11).<sup>91</sup> Douglass’s dilemma of what he could and should do to fulfill his resolve to be free, of how to implement the promise he made to himself, was a variation on this theme. Just as instances of “*suiting the action to the word*” pose a challenge to Austin because such an instance is “a special type of case which may generate performatives but which is not in itself a case of the performative utterance” (81), Douglass’s “*suiting my action to the resolution*” testifies to the impasse he encountered in conceptualizing the act of fighting as the fulfillment of some prior promise. We may say that “I resolved to fight” is an ultimate case of speech act in which the undertaking is not divorced from the declaration of intention, the act is not just promised but performed in the utterance. Yet this ultimate case also goes beyond the proper scope of speech act theory and calls into question the propriety of Austin’s basic procedure that exclusively focuses on speech acts as differentiated from acts as such<sup>92</sup> by suggesting the possibility that the performed act can be in excess of the original

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<sup>91</sup> According to Felman, this is a felicitous, rather than infelicitous, feature of Austin. She points out, for instance, that “Austin . . . establishes a limit only to transgress it, that is, to *in-fire*: to declassify, to disarticulate, to deconstruct” (47).

<sup>92</sup> Of course, to the extent that his hypothetical enemy was “an age-old assumption in philosophy—the assumption that to say something, at least in all cases worth considering, i.e. all cases considered, is always and simply to *state* something” (12), Austin’s approach was quite justifiable (and it turned out quite seminal as well) as an initial attempt to bridge the conceptual gap between saying and doing. At least, he was well aware that “the notion of an act is unclear” (106).

intention declared. Specifically, it confounds Austin's principal claim that we "have to draw the line between an action we do [*i.e.*, a speech act] and its consequences," between "our actual action in the supposed minimum physical sense" involved in a performative utterance itself and other accompanying physical actions, because this speech act is immediately and inseparably joined with its (allegedly) consequential physical movements (111).

Given the act's irreducible weight that asserts itself in Douglass's resolve, then, isn't it possible to reverse in this case the supposed causal relationship between the performative utterance and its consequences—a causal order which both the ex-slave narrator and the linguistic philosopher seem to endorse? Despite Douglass's placing of the act after the willing (an internal performative utterance of promising), their inseparability suggests that the temporal gap between them was infinitesimally small, or approximately zero. And if we push this line of argument one step further, it would be arguable that the resolve constituted an imaginary zero point of the act, a kind of mythical origin to which the act was to be traced down. Is it too much to say, then, that Douglass retroactively discovered the resolve in the act which he was forced to perform at the instant? Can we consider Douglass's "I resolved to fight" as a performative, not in the sense of a performative utterance that promises and as such is independent of any subsequent act that fulfills it, but in the sense of a retroactive declaration of his own willpower with which he discursively punctuated the continuous, in itself indivisible succession of physical actions, and which in turn propelled him to further actions? In other words, are we justified in conceiving Douglass's resolve as *ex post facto* (not before its supposed consequences) marking a break comparable to that which Austin describes

as specifically made by acts of saying something as differentiated from ordinary physical actions—“a sort of regular natural break in the chain, which is wanting in the case of physical actions” (113)?

This is not to suggest, I hasten to add, that Douglass’s resolve to fight was a mere fiction that the narrator concocted in order to make his narrative look more ‘heroic.’ On the contrary, in my view it is perfectly true that he “resolved” at the moment of fighting, though perhaps not exactly in the manner he described, and that without it, what he called a “glorious resurrection” could not have happened (65). In any case, as he explained in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, he had made up his mind to defend his life (a common type of resolution, in my distinction) before the fight took place. Perhaps my point will be clear if we compare Douglass’s resolve to fight with the “sudden spring” he had made from the ladder in response to Covey’s inaugural assault a few seconds earlier. I have already mentioned how his initial spring prefigured his resolve. He gave a leap away from the given causal relationship in his mind with the resolve to fight. In Douglass’s account, this leap in the mind was synchronized with an actual leap of his body; a blinking moment later, or I would say, approximately at the same time, he made a bodily spring (“I rose”), with his hands seizing the assailant by the throat. The first physical spring, then, foreshadowed the second, far more decisive one in the mind and by the body. The second leap was as ‘mechanical’ an action as the first, both equally necessitated by the stream of events. Yet, the two leaps were definitely different in their significances since the subject found a realization of his will in the second, while not in the first. Even though his will might have been retroactively discovered in an indefinite vanishing point that immediately preceded his act, Douglass made the ‘resolve’ in the sense that he

punctuated his physical actions with his declaration of resolution, and that this act of resolving, which was completely coincident with the act of fighting, transformed him into a different subject who realized what the 'he' an instant before should have willed but had been unaware of. In this sense, Douglass's prior resolution upon self-defense was, though a necessary condition, not enough for his transformation; it needed to be completed by an act, in which he jumped onto a so far unknown horizon that revealed the object of his will, and the status of his resolve itself, in a whole new light.

In order to clarify the nature of this transformation, we need to look at what took place after his resolve and how he describes this event. Now, Douglass and Covey grappled with each other, inextricably interlocked: "He held onto me, and I to him." The unanticipated resistance from the slave struck the master with sheer shock and made him "tremble like a leaf." The slave in inverse proportion derived encouragement from the sight of his adversary's plain surprise and uneasiness, further spurred on into a firmer grasp of the master's body, "causing the blood to run where I touched him with the ends of my fingers." Seeing his own strength no longer avail to get out from this deadlock, Covey croaked out for help. In response, his cousin Hughes, and then later another hired slave named Bill made an appearance. Douglass successfully repulsed the former with a nasty kick in the stomach, and the latter just made an evasive answer, leaving the two to "fight [their] own battle out." Douglass and Covey remained in a stalemate in this manner "for nearly two hours." Finally, the slave breaker gave in to the slave's unyielding tenacity and let him go (64). After this incident, in which "he had drawn no blood from me, but I had from him," Covey "never laid the weight of his finger upon me in anger" (65). Douglass's retrospective observation on the triumph bears quotation at length:

This battle with Mr. Covey was the turning-point in my career as a slave. . . . I felt as I never felt before. It was a glorious resurrection, from the tomb of slavery, to the heaven of freedom. My long-crushed spirit rose, cowardice departed, bold defiance took its place; and I now resolved that, however long I might remain a slave in form, the day had passed forever when I could be a slave in fact. (65)

This remark demonstrates the degree to which the fight, and essentially its dimension as an act, constituted the core of his experience that functioned as the uttermost point of reference for the whole narrative. Douglass's resolve to fight, which the narrator once designated as the originating point of this critical sequence of events, was now overshadowed by the act of fighting itself that defeated the arch enemy. Rather than his resolution to be free directly leading to his resolve to fight and finally to the triumph, the last event renewed his previous determination to be free and in the same stroke retroactively bridged the gap opening between each instance of his resolution. The fight established a perspective in which what were otherwise disjunct became a meaningful, if not completely coherent, series of incidents. The act was transformative, and even revolutionary, in the sense that after that, all that which had previously taken place was to be seen in a different light.

It is worth mentioning here that although he markedly diverged from Kant's position in his emphasis on the act, Douglass was not wholly removed from it since the transformation of the subject constitutes an indispensable ingredient of Kantian ethics, if not its official agenda. In *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (1793), Kant argues,

. . . if a man is to become not merely *legally*, but *morally*, a good man . . . , *this* cannot be brought about through gradual *reformation* so long as the basis of the maxims remains impure, but must be effected through a *revolution* in the man's disposition. . . . He can become a new man only by a kind of rebirth, as it were a new creation. . . . (42-43; emphasis original)

These words are curiously resonant in theme and vocabulary with Douglass's language that describes his "glorious resurrection." Predictably, however, Kant dared not mention what should bring about such a revolution in a man's disposition. In an attempt to fill in the lacuna left by Kant's silence, Zupančič elaborates on the philosopher's frequently quoted formulation of the "fundamental law of pure practical reason," or what he calls the categorical imperative: "[s]o act that the maxim of your will could always hold at the same time as a principle in a giving of universal law" (*Critique of Practical Reason* 28). According to Zupančič, the Kantian moral law, insofar as it is a law of nature taken only in its form, is "not the 'whole' law" but a "'half-law,' just as the categorical imperative is a 'half-said.'"<sup>93</sup> In other words, the moral law

in order to become a law, has to be supplemented with an act of the subject. The moral law as atemporal and trans-subjective 'depends' upon a temporal act of the subject, an act which has no pre-established guarantee in the law (in the 'big Other'), for it is only in this act that the law itself is constituted. . . . the law is not always-already there, waiting for the subject to submit herself to it: it is this very submission, the (ethical) act, which constitutes the Law as atemporal and trans-subjective. (Zupančič 163)

Kant's call for a moral rebirth of the subject should be understood in connection with this temporal act of the subject that completes the moral law qua atemporal form. As Zupančič points out, such an act must be distinguished from an ordinary action in that it "radically transforms its bearer (agent). After an act, I am 'not the same as before.' In the act, the subject is annihilated and subsequently reborn (or not); the act involves a kind of

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<sup>93</sup> Zupančič adapts the phrase "half-said" from Lacan. In *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan argues that the enigma of truth as knowledge is a "half-saying [*mi-dire*], just as the Chimera appears as a half-body, with the risk of disappearing altogether once the solution has been found," and that truth "cannot be said completely, for the reason that beyond this half[-saying] there is nothing to say" (36, 51).

temporary eclipse of the subject” (83).<sup>94</sup> If the Kantian moral subject undergoes a revolution in his disposition, it is only when he acts so that the act gives rise to a new subject who finds the moral law realized in the act. What Douglass experienced in the fight with Covey was precisely this kind of subjective transformation in the act.

The transformative character of the act explains why Douglass had to discover the object of his will *ex post facto*. Douglass always willed freedom, and to that extent was regularly at pains to adopt the supreme maxim in line with the law of freedom, but he didn't and couldn't know what the maxim or principle was. Rather, he found he had conducted himself in accordance with the maxim only *after* the act of fighting. Only the posterior perspective consequent upon the self-revolution revealed the content of the maxim where a void had gaped open.

It should be kept in mind here that in a typical manner of his, Kant locates the ethical act at the level of the “intelligible” rather than at that of the “sensible.” Prior to the above quoted passage about the ethical transformation, Kant distinguishes two meanings of the term “act.” One denotes the exercise of freedom through which the will adopts the supreme maxim as regards the law, whereas the other designates the actions performed according to that adopted maxim. In other words, the former is “intelligible action, cognizable by means of pure reason alone, apart from every temporal condition”; the latter “sensible action, empirical, given in time” (*Religion* 26-27). For Kant, a subject is moral not so much because he carries out an empirically perceptible action in accordance with the moral law as because he performs a psychological act of choosing what Kant

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<sup>94</sup> Although in Kant's terminology the distinction between act [*Tat*] and action [*Handlung*] is not consistently made, Zupančič's differentiation of a (transformative, ethical) act from an (ordinary) action seems to a large extent to conform to Kant's original intention.

calls a moral propensity [*Hang*] or disposition [*Gesinnung*]. Kant argues that a propensity is to be “distinguished from a predisposition by the fact that although it can indeed be innate, it *ought* . . . also [to] be regarded as having been *acquired*” (*Religion* 24). Yet, this does not necessarily mean that a subject can explicitly and self-consciously assume a moral propensity. As Allison points out, “[o]ne does not, after all, one day deliberately resolve to ‘make it one’s maxim’ to allow moral holidays under certain conditions” (153). The paradox concerning a moral disposition is, then, that one must will to acquire it but ultimately the process cannot but remain an unconscious one. In a sense, the ethical transformation is an answer that Kant has devised to solve this paradox. Rather than gradually and self-consciously cultivating a moral propensity in one’s mind, at one point, suddenly, one leaps onto the thither shore of moral consciousness, on which “one finds that this is how one has been behaving all along” (Allison 153). What happened to Douglass during the fight with Covey was precisely such a retroactive discovery of the revolution of the mind. A remarkable difference between the Kantian ethical transformation and Douglass’s case, however, was that whereas for the German philosopher the ethical act was no more (and no less) than a process taking place in the mind independently from every empirical, temporal determination, for the American slave the law of freedom remained unfinished unless he carried out a real, “given-in-time” act that brought the atemporal “half-law” to completion. To the extent that he put the finishing, decisive touches to the Kantian “half-act” of freedom with his own act, Douglass was a truly legitimate, if unacknowledged, heir to the ethical legacy the philosopher had left behind unaccomplished.



It is important to point out also that even if Douglass's "resurrection" was a subjective experience, it also involved an indissoluble objective dimension to the extent that the act arose out of the objective reality and its causal order that circumscribed him. Douglass's assertion that neither Covey nor any other person ever flogged him after this event demonstrates the degree in which his subjective transformation entailed a change of his objective horizon. Before this incident, Douglass was day in and day out faced with the cruel world of slavery, but somehow never came to grips with it as if some invisible dividing line existed between him and the objective world, so that while the world was always *there* demanding submission, he was permanently prohibited from acting upon it. Yet, his head-on confrontation with Covey proffered him a chance to grasp in his hands the coercive force of the repressive social apparatus that had been so elusive until it was fully incarnated at that instant in the body of his assailant. The fight was an exceptional moment—but this exception was of utmost critical importance in that it was the highest point Douglass's aspiration for freedom reached and determined the limits of his conception of freedom—in which the subject was empowered in the man-to-man grappling to take hold of and work directly upon objective reality, even though at the risk of his own life being extinguished in the contest or in the punishment duly consequent upon it, and from which both the subject and the object came out transfigured. The act of fighting revolutionized its agent as well as what was acted against, and this was precisely what made the battle with Covey an act, not an ordinary action—not just one of a series of remarkable incidents in Douglass's life, but a singular event that threw its long shadow on what took place before and after, a kind of North Star of his narrative in light of which the narrator re-visioned his life.

## THE HEGELIAN DIALECTIC AND THE *SACHE SELBST* OF FREEDOM

We have seen how Douglass conceived of his battle with Covey as a turning point of his life and the significant ways in which his account of the event intersects with the Kantian conception of the law of freedom. The comparison between the two authors living in separate times and places is especially important because they both struggled with the concept of freedom at its limits, in so doing pushing it to the point where it touched upon what Kant calls the thing-in-itself, the ‘beyond’ of our intellection, even though the fields in which they each pursued this problem were different—one philosophical, and the other a real historical situation in which freedom was utterly negated. It should be pointed out, on the other hand, that in his insistence on the historicity of the act of freedom, Douglass bears an equally productive comparison with another great thinker of his time—Hegel. Specifically, the way Douglass described the slave’s deadly engagement with the (deputy) master calls for its examination in light of the celebrated dialectic of master and slave Hegel expounded in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), a book that emerged in the aftermath of Kant’s groundbreaking *Critiques*.

The profundity of Kant’s influence on Hegel was indisputable. During the period when the storm of the Revolution was raging in France, the young Hegel rhapsodized about the prospect of a “revolution in Germany” which he expected from “the Kantian philosophy and its highest completion” (qtd. in Pinkard 55). Even in his more mature work, the *Science of Logic* (1812-16), Hegel did not conceal his admiration for Kant’s achievements: “the Kantian philosophy . . . constitutes the base and the starting point of recent German philosophy and this its merit remains unaffected by whatever faults may be found in it. . . . The philosophizing which is most widespread among us does *not* go

beyond the Kantian results . . .” (61). Hegel’s indebtedness to Kant was so great that, as Kroner puts it, “[t]o eliminate the Kantian element in Hegel’s philosophy is like eliminating the Platonic element in Aristotle” (4). Specifically, Hegel gained from the great forerunner an insight that led to the development of his signature method, dialectic, which he “would never have found . . . without the ‘Transcendental Dialectic’ in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*” (Kroner 5).

As important as dialectic in Kant’s influence on Hegel was the idea of freedom. For Kant, freedom is by definition the will’s freedom, and what he designates with the word ‘will’ is nothing other than the free will. It should be noted here that although he is not always consistent in his terminology, in the *Metaphysics of Morals* Kant draws an explicit distinction between two registers of the will broadly speaking: *Willkür* (variously translated as ‘willfulness,’ ‘the capacity for choice,’ or simply ‘choice’) and *Wille* (‘will’). *Willkür* is the “faculty to *do or to refrain from doing as one pleases.*” *Wille* is, by contrast, the “faculty of desire considered not so much in relation to action (as *Willkür* is) but rather in relation to the ground determining *Willkür* to action” (13).<sup>95</sup> This distinction corresponds to the two meanings of ‘act’ that we saw earlier: *Willkür* concerns the choice of one’s empirical action, while *Wille* has to do with the intelligible act of choosing the determining ground for the choice (*e.g.*, the adoption of a moral disposition). For Kant, free will is not to be confused with *Willkür*; we are not free just because we can do whatever we want to do. Nor is it a will that simply adopts as its maxim whatever impulse or desire it happens to harbor. In either case, the will falls into a type of the aforementioned “evil heart.” As distinguished from these lesser forms of the will, the

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<sup>95</sup> I have changed “choice” to “*Willkür*” in this quotation.

truly free will is the faculty of desire that works in accordance with reason as the determining ground of our intelligible acts.

This concept of free will was one of the most vital elements Hegel inherited from the Kantian philosophy (Rawls 337-38). In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel attacks the popular conception of free will, according to which “one is free when one can do what one wills” (27).<sup>96</sup> Hegel argues what people typically believe to be their will is in fact willfulness [*Willkür*], which is not “the will in its truth” but “the will as contradiction” (27). The willful consciousness considers itself as capable of “abstracting from every determination,” even while its desire is determined by a particular, external “content and object” (20-21). More correctly speaking, the undetermined “abstract I” imagines itself as free *precisely because* it can affirm a contingently given desire at its will (22). As Hegel puts it, however, “[t]he undetermined will is . . . just as one-sided as is the will that remains merely within determinacy” (22). For the undetermined will, the desire it has affirmed is no more than a “mere possibility” among many; the will happens to have settled upon that option and hence is not so internally “bound” by it that it could not readily discard it and adopt another (23). A willful consciousness is thus perpetually divided between “the indeterminacy of the I” and “the determinacy of a content,” between its own undetermined “universality” and determined “particularity,” without synthesizing the two opposing moments (28, 23). Insofar as it remains within an

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<sup>96</sup> I consult two different translations of Hegel’s *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*. In quoting from the work, I select the translation that I consider better suits the purpose of my argument. Both when the source is indicated as *Philosophy of Right* and when no source except page number is parenthetically mentioned, I’m quoting from Allan White’s English translation. When “*Outlines*” appears in a parenthetical documentation, I’m quoting from Knox and Houlgate’s English translation, *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*.

“illusion” of freedom that maintains this contradiction, “both these moments are only abstractions,” not leading to a true “unity” (28, 23).<sup>97</sup> Hegel’s point is that to overcome the contradiction it should be recognized that “[f]reedom . . . lies neither in indeterminacy nor in determinacy; it is both at once” (23).

But how can the will be both an undetermined universal and a determined particular at the same time? Freedom remains an empty, extraneous idea for the will insofar as it is merely an abstract universality. Confronting the abstract idea of freedom, the will likewise remains a “formal will” that is determined only by “the formal opposition of its subjectivity to the objectivity of external immediate existence,” unless it “translates the subjective purpose into objectivity through the mediation of its own activity and some external means” and thereby makes its subjective determinations its own objective “content” (*Outlines* 33-34). In other words, the desire that subjectively determines and hence particularizes a will must coincide with the will for freedom as its universal object and content. Since “freedom and will are for me the unity of the subjective and objective,” where there is no such unity, freedom, like the desire, remains a “mere possibility,” or in Hegel’s well-known term, no more than “in itself.” As Hegel puts it, “what exists only in itself . . . does not yet exist in its actuality” (*Outlines* 34-35). As for the will, Hegel similarly maintains that it is “not until it has itself as its object that the will

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<sup>97</sup> Hegel mentions that every philosophy of reflection, including Kant’s, is captive of the illusion of freedom as a “formal self-activity,” but is too well aware of the subtleties of the Kantian philosophy and his undeniable indebtedness to it to neglect to add a parenthetical qualification: the philosophy in question is not exactly Kant’s so much as “Kant’s deprived of all its depth by Fries” (28). Jakob Friedrich Fries (1773-1843) was Hegel’s predecessor in professorship at Heidelberg in 1805-16. In the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel scornfully calls Fries a “commanding officer of this shallowness that calls itself philosophizing” (5). For the “deep antipathy” between Hegel and Fries, see, *e.g.*, Pinkard 223.

is *for itself* what it is in itself” (*Outlines* 34). Only when the will makes itself its own object does it become “*in and for itself*” (i.e., a universal endowed with an actualized existence by its being anchored in an individual desire but simultaneously overcoming the immediacy of the natural desire) (*Outlines* 41-42). Needless to say, the will which becomes its own object is nothing other than a free will, and insofar as the free will is a will for freedom, freedom determines the will as its object and driving force. In Hegel’s words, “a will is truly a will only when what it wills, its content, is identical with itself, when, that is to say, freedom wills freedom” (*Outlines* 42). Thus Hegel observes that the “absolute determination,” or the “absolute drive,” of the free will is “to make its freedom its object,” and that the free will is “*the will that wills the free will*” (34). From Hegel’s remarks above we can reformulate a working definition of the free will: “the free will is the will that wills itself as the free will” (Rawls 330). At least on this point, Hegel agrees with Kant. Just as Kant’s “fact of reason,” the ultimate determining ground of the will, posits itself by announcing itself as originally lawgiving, the Hegelian free will performs a self-positing through the act of willing. For Hegel as well as for Kant, the will is “*self-determining universality*”—the foundationless foundation of itself—, and the same is the case with the will’s content and object, freedom (*Outlines* 41).

Thus the Hegelian conception of the free will confirms what we have already seen concerning Douglass’s acts of resolve in light of Kant: each time he determined to run away, the slave more firmly anchored the abstract idea of freedom in his disposition as the object of his most commanding drive. At the same time, Hegel casts light on what Kant leaves obscure as regards Douglass’s act of freedom. First, Hegel considers the

Kantian moral law as purely formal and therefore empty. In the 1802 essay on *Natural Law*, Hegel argues,

Kant . . . recognizes full well that practical reason totally renounces the content of law and can do nothing beyond making the form of fitness of the will's maxim into supreme law. . . . The content of the maxim remains what it is, a specification or singularity, and the universality conferred on it by its reception into the form is thus a merely analytic unity. . . . It is a self-contradiction to seek in this absolute practical reason a moral legislation which would have to have a content, since the essence of this reason is to have none." (qtd. in Kainz 109n11)

In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel makes a similar argument in a different context. What he has in mind is the historical situation depicted in classical Greek tragedies such as *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone*: when the old harmony between individual and society, between individual ethical consciousness and communal law is crumbling, when, in other words, "consciousness separates itself from its immediate, substantial essence and withdraws into itself," then "it becomes the merely formal universal into which one content as well as another fits equally well," and the conflict between atomized ethical consciousnesses, each with its own discrete loyalty to duty, inevitably takes place (279).

In the *Phenomenology* Hegel extends his criticism of the Kantian moral philosophy to a related yet slightly different point as well. It concerns Kant's treatment of moral action. As we saw earlier, for Kant the act of freedom is no more than an act that the subject carries out in his mind out of the respect for the moral law which equals the law of freedom; even when it causes what Kant calls a "revolution," it designates a sea change that primarily concerns the subject's moral disposition, not his actions in the objective world. In the section titled "Dissemblance or Duplicity" [*Die Verstellung*], Hegel directs the scathing phrase, "a 'whole nest' of thoughtless contradictions," which Kant used to criticize the "cosmological proof" for the existence of God in the *Critique of*

*Pure Reason*, against the “moral world-view” of which, in Hegel’s estimate, Kant’s system of morality itself is the culmination (374).<sup>98</sup> The moral world-view, argues Hegel, holds that “Nature is in conformity with the moral law,” but if this is true, then morality “would be in fact be violated [by action,] by the setting-aside [*Aufheben*] of what is in existence” (376).<sup>99</sup> Moral action in the objective world aims at changing the prevailing condition of the world. Yet, if nature is already in harmony with morality, there is no need for moral action, or worse, as Hegel puts it, such action is “superfluous,” since it does nothing but disturbs the preexistent harmony (376). With Kant, however, a shift takes place within the moral world-view. While the pre-Kantian moral world-view presupposes the harmony between morality and nature, what is present in the Kantian moral philosophy is rather the “contradiction” between nature and morality (the moral law must be independent of natural determinations) (375). Now not nature but morality is “the ‘in-itself,’ the merely *implicit* element [*das Ansich*]; if it is to be *actual*, the final purpose of the world cannot be fulfilled; rather the moral consciousness must exist on its own account [*fürsich*] and find itself confronted by a Nature *opposed* to it” (377). Even in this altered configuration, the old devaluation of moral action in moral consciousness obtains. Rather, Hegel considers Kant’s preemption of “the highest good” serves merely to “dissemble this *suppression* of moral action” (377).<sup>100</sup>

Hegel’s criticism of Kantian philosophy more broadly concerns Kant’s rigid separation of the sensible world from the things-in-themselves that are not available to

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<sup>98</sup> Kant’s actual expression in the *Critique of Pure Reason* is “a whole nest of dialectical claims” [*ein ganzes Nest von dialektischen Anmassungen*] (510).

<sup>99</sup> Miller’s English translation omits “*durch das Handeln*” (“through action”) in the original.

<sup>100</sup> Kant argues, for instance, in the *Critique of Practical Reason* that “[i]t is a priori (morally) necessary to produce the highest good through the freedom of the will” (95).



knowledge. This issue is also correlated with the question of moral action discussed above, since Kant's exclusion of *das Ding-an-sich* from the sphere of his investigation warrants the demarcation of the proper realm of reason, which is in turn so defined as the proper realm in which the will performs moral 'acts,' that it is to be distinguished from the world in which one carries out moral actions objectively. In place of Kant's *Ding*, which is by definition outside the scope of exploration, Hegel puts forth a *Sache* at the center of his inquiry. In both the Preface and the Introduction to the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel a couple of times employs this term to mean philosophy's real "subject-matter": it designates the "the real issue" [*die Sache selbst*] that superficial unphilosophical explanations invariably evade, or philosophy's "proper subject-matter [*die Sache selbst*], viz. the actual cognition of what truly is [*das wirkliche Erkennen dessen, was in Wahrheit ist*]" (1-2, 46).<sup>101</sup> As Kainz points out, this suggests that Hegel's goal in the *Phenomenology* is "to find a, or perhaps *the*, unique *Sache*, which is an object not just outside the reach of cognition but rather permeated with rationality, or conversely, to uncover a species of rationality no longer at odds with reality" (xv). Unlike Kant, Hegel does not consider that the world will not wholly submit itself to knowledge. Rather, as he famously puts it in the *Philosophy of Right*, "[w]hat is rational is actual and what is actual is rational" (*Outlines* 14). Reason is precisely what makes reality what it is. On account of this, reason can attain the absolute knowledge of the world if it never ceases to exert itself to comprehend or grasp [*begreifen*] it.

One of the central concerns of the Hegelian philosophy is to formulate this logic of the "*Sache selbst*." It should be noted here that in an attempt to bridge the seeming

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<sup>101</sup> For other relevant meanings and uses of the word *Sache*, see Kaufmann 7n2.

unbridgeable gap between reason and things, Hegel advances the “unity of being and nothing.” This postulate is especially pertinent to Douglass in that it explains the ground logic of freedom. In the *Science of Logic*, Hegel argues,

*Pure being and pure nothing are . . . the same. What is the truth is neither being nor nothing, but that being—does not pass over but has passed over—into nothing, and nothing into being. But it is equally true that they are not undistinguished from each other, that, on the contrary, they are not the same, that they are absolutely distinct, and yet that they are unseparated and inseparable and that each immediately vanishes in its opposite. Their truth is, therefore, this movement of the immediate vanishing of the one in the other: becoming, a movement in which both are distinguished, but by a difference which has equally immediately resolved itself. (82-83)*

Hegel levels this criticism against the traditional proposition of metaphysics, *ex nihilo nihil fit*—out of nothing comes nothing, nothing is just nothing (84). This position has little to say about freedom, since according to its logic, freedom is no more than the state of being free from any constraints or determinations, the absence of necessity, or pure nothing, and there is no sense in arguing the will wills pure nothing. For Hegel (and as far as this matter is concerned, perhaps for Kant as well), on the other hand, inasmuch as the will’s act of freedom is that through which the will posits itself as the free will, raises itself as being from the ground of groundless nothing, it demonstrates the identity of being and nothing.

It comes as no surprise, then, that freedom is comparable to the *Sache selbst* in several remarkably ways. Hegel examines the identity of being and nothing as part of the logic of being, which is followed by the logic of essence. In light of the latter logic, being turns out to be unreal—“being is illusory being” [*Das Sein ist Schein*—since being is “the immediate” (*Science of Logic* 395, 389). Knowledge, argues Hegel, has to penetrate the superficial immediate for the purpose of comprehending what being is “*in and for*

*itself*” (389). Taken at the deeper level, “[t]he truth of being is essence,” and conversely, “[b]eing is simply only the *becoming* of essence [*das Werden zum Wesen*]” (389, 472). Just like being, essence consists of layers of determinateness. Hegel strips essence of its determinations one by one, and what at last remains is “ground”: “As *ground* . . . [essence] posits itself *as essence*, and it is in positing itself as essence that its determining consists” (445). Ground is likewise to be peeled off its inessential elements, ultimately revealing itself as the “absolutely unconditioned” (472). It is at this point that Hegel brings the *Sache selbst* into his argument. He equates the “truly unconditioned” with the “*Sache an sich selbst*” (translated as the “fact in its own self”) and then elucidates how the *Sache* “emerges from the ground”—from what might be called the groundless ground (474-77):

Ground . . . does not remain behind as something distinct from the grounded, but the truth of grounding is that in it ground is united with itself. . . . the fact [*Sache*] is not only the *unconditioned* but also the *groundless*, and it emerges from ground only in so far as ground has “*fallen to the ground*” [*zu Grunde gegangen*] and ceased to be ground: it emerges from the groundless, that is, from its own essential negativity or pure form. (478)

Thus the logic of the *Sache* illustrates how the absolutely unconditioned free will emerges simultaneously as the “fact” of willing and as its ground(-lessness). The will is free and unconditioned, not because it is entirely free from external and internal necessities, but inasmuch as it wills itself as an object that raises itself from its own groundless ground.

The above quoted passage also indicates how constitutively the fact of freedom is grounded in freedom’s “pure form.” For Hegel, form is “only the reflection of essence into essence itself [*das Scheinen desselben in sich selbst*], essence’s own immanent reflection” (449-50). As far as the “absolute fact” is concerned, the whole conceptual division, “form and content,” should be reconceived accordingly, since the fact keeps its

moments of form and content inseparably: the absolute fact “possesses within itself the unity of its form with itself, or its *content*; and in the very act of determining this content to be condition it sublates [*aufhebt*] the diversity of the content and reduces it to a moment, just as, conversely, as essenceless form it gives itself the immediacy of a subsistence in this self-identity” (476). The free will’s content is nothing other than the free will itself reduced to a content in its very act of determination.<sup>102</sup>

In addition, what Hegel calls the “law of ground” [*Satze des Grundes*] explains freedom’s status as law. He points out that ground “has been expressed in the form of a law [*Satze*]; everything has its sufficient ground” (446). This is simply because “what *is*, is not to be regarded as a merely *affirmative immediate* [*seiendes Unmittelbares*], but as something *posited* [*Gesetztes*]” (446). It is important to recall here that the German term for “law” is *Gesetz*, which literally means “that which is posited.” If law is something posited, it must be posited on some ground. In this sense, law is the positive aspect of essence (which is to be distinguished from immediate being), while ground is its “negativity” in which essence is “identical with itself”—as Hegel puts it, the ‘positing’ of ground is nothing but a “sublating of itself” (447). Essence does not show its face as a law without the presupposition of a ground, which never reveals itself except as the shadow of essence. The *Sache selbst* of freedom carries this logic of essence to its terminal point: the ground is now exactly coextensive with the self-positing fact of freedom, and when its positedness is laid bare, it manifests itself as the law of freedom.

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<sup>102</sup> For an interesting reading of the dialectical movement of the concepts of form and its other (form/essence, form/matter, and form/content) in Hegel’s logic of essence, see Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative* 134-36.

Hegel's investment in the *Sache selbst* evinces an irreducible "materialist" bent in his so-called "absolute idealism." What he has shown is not so much the dialectical synthesis (and hence the evaporation) of all in the Absolute Spirit as the dialectical interpenetration of idea and matter—how knowledge, as he puts it in the Preface to the *Phenomenology*, "travel[s] a long way and work[s] its passage" through the dense, tangled thickets of subjective and objective bare materials in order to grow into "genuine knowledge" (15).

Given his preoccupation with worldly matters, it is not surprising to hear Hegel repeatedly speak of the "life of the concept" and conversely pronounce acerbic strictures upon the prevailing *soi-disant* 'scientific' method of "labeling all that is in heaven and earth" so that everything is "pigeonhol[ed]" into predetermined categories. Its "monotonous formalism," argues Hegel, reduces knowledge to "a lifeless schema, a mere shadow [*Schemen*]" (not surprisingly, Hegel holds Kant to some extent responsible for this trend) (*Phenomenology* 29-31). In order to emphasize the 'living' dimensions of knowledge, Hegel invokes the materiality of the *Sache* once again at this point: the method of cataloguing everything is

like a skeleton with scraps of paper stuck all over it, or like the rows of closed and labelled boxes in a grocer's stall. . . . just as all the flesh and blood has been stripped from this skeleton, and the no longer living 'essence' [*Sache*] has been packed away in the boxes, so in [this method] the living essence of the matter [*Wesen der Sache*] has been stripped away or boxed up dead. (31)

Pages later, towards the end of the section on "Observing Reason," when he is discussing phrenology, Hegel reverts to the same contrast of the living essence (signified by the flesh and blood) and the dead skeleton. This time, however, he does so with a view to reversing their relation: "in . . . dead objectivity—for the bone is a dead thing, so far as

what is dead is present in the living being itself—Spirit is explicitly present as actual” (210). The living essence is in dead objects themselves, or one can even say, a dead object is the living essence itself. This is because “Reason takes itself to be *all thinghood* [*Dingheit*], even *purely objective thinghood* itself” (210).

Yet, it must be pointed out that there is a qualification: Reason can conceptually grasp its sameness with Thing only when it goes beyond the level of representation or picture-thinking [*Vorstellung*]; otherwise, Spirit and Thing, and life and death as well, remain fatally separate. Only at the level of the Concept [*Begriff*] which overcomes the limitations of picture-thinking does Reason know the truth that “the *being of Spirit is a bone*,” that “the self is a Thing” (208-09). Hegel calls this mode of conceptual grasp the “*infinite judgment*” [*unendliche Urteil*] in the sense of a “judgment that suspends [*aufhebt*] itself,” and illustrates it with the example of the “conjunction of the high and the low” in the body of a living being, that is, the coexistence of the functions of fecundation and urination in the single organ (penis): “[t]he infinite judgment, *qua* infinite, would be the fulfillment of life that comprehends itself; the consciousness of the infinite judgment that remains at the level of picture-thinking behaves as urination” (209-10). Through the infinite judgment, Reason attains the conceptual grasp of its being present to itself in its other, that is, Thing, and likewise Spirit’s presence to itself in life. (It is important to recall Hegel’s distinction of the genuine and the spurious infinite in the *Encyclopaedia Logic* (1817; enlarged 1827). Infinity in the mathematical or spatial sense is spurious since it is “nothing but the negation of the finite, but the finite arises again in the same way, so that it is no more sublated than not” (149). The genuine infinity, by contrast, consists in “remaining at home with itself in its other, or (when it is expressed as

a process) in coming to itself in its other” (149). In other words, the true infinity is not “the perpetual continuation of the alteration” between two opposing determinations, which permanently keeps the two asunder, but one’s permeation in and with its other (149.) Conversely, if Reason does not carry the infinite judgment beyond the level of representation, it ends in a crude materialism that reduces—if we stick with Hegel’s example—the whole function of the penis to that of urination without seeing its essential unity with the life-begetting function, just as phrenology reduces the infinite expansion of Spirit to the limited dimensions of an empty skull without recognizing Spirit’s dialectical presence within the bone.

Lastly, however, it should be also emphasized that although it is to be overcome in the Concept, knowledge at the rudimentary stage of picture-thinking is a necessary phase in dialectical thinking. Reason cannot directly leap onto the infinite judgment without first passing through a ‘naïve’ understanding. This is why Hegel seems to take an ambiguous stance towards phrenology; in his account, phrenology is a kind of ‘synthesis,’ a (near-)last stage of dialectical development, of psychology and physiognomy, even though it is not the conceptual grasp of the spirit and life yet (195). As Žižek points out concerning the above mentioned proposition, “the being of Spirit is a bone,” “in the choice between ‘naïve’ [*i.e.*, phrenological] and speculative [*i.e.*, dialectical] reading, one has first to make the wrong choice if one is to arrive at the speculative truth” (*Tarrying with the Negative* 245n41).<sup>103</sup> The false is an essential moment of the true. Hegel explicitly makes this point in the following striking passage:

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<sup>103</sup> Žižek compares the statement “the Spirit is a bone” to what Hegel calls the “speculative [*begreifendes*] proposition” (*Phenomenology* 38). It seems that what Hegel is driving at with that phrase is not so dissimilar from the infinite judgment *qua* infinite.

[Philosophy] is the process which begets and traverses its own moments, and this whole movements constitutes what is positive [in it] and its truth. This truth therefore includes the negative also, what would be called the false, if it could be regarded as something from which one might abstract. The evanescent itself must, on the contrary, be regarded as essential, not as something fixed, cut off from the True, and left lying who know where outside it, any more than the True is to be regarded as something on the other side, positive and dead. Appearance is the arising and passing away that does not itself arise and pass away, but is ‘in itself’ [i.e. subsists intrinsically], and constitutes the actuality and the movement of the life of truth. The True is thus the Bacchanalian revel [*Traumel*] in which no member is not drunk; yet because each member collapses as soon as he drops out, the revel is just as much transparent and simple repose. (*Phenomenology* 27)

It should be clear by this time that the Bacchanalian whirl is the *Sache selbst*, insofar as it is “the *whole* of the movement, seen as a state of repose” (28). The earlier mentioned “identity of being and nothing” is formulated to explain the “in-itself,” positive and necessary appearance of evanescent and negative moments in the whirl. This formula, however, remains merely in itself, an abstract, empty proposition, unless we comprehend how being emerges as a positive entity by dint of the transient internal pressure of its own content. As Hegel puts in the *Science of Logic*, his dialectical method is “not something distinct from its object and content; for it is the inwardness of the content, the dialectic which it possesses within itself, which is the mainspring of its advance” (54).

### THE MASTER-SLAVE DIALECTIC

The foregoing argument about the Hegelian philosophy provides a framework for my reading of Douglass in light of the master-slave dialectic.<sup>104</sup> As I have already pointed

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For a more elaborated Lacanian/Žižekian take on the same Hegelian proposition, see Žižek, *Sublime Object* 207-09.

<sup>104</sup> Several critics have already attempted to read Douglass’s battle with Covey (and sometimes his fictionalized account of slave resistance in the novella “The Heroic Slave” as well) in terms of the Hegelian dialectic of master and slave (Gilroy 62-63; Sundquist 123-24; Kohn; Willet; Young). But they tend to focus on the fear of death and/or the struggle for recognition, while my argument pays more attention to the dimensions of matter and bodily action involved in the dialectic. For a reading of the fight from the



out, the flash of freedom that fleetingly appeared in his consciousness when he was completely deprived of freedom is comparable to the lightning with which Hegel illustrates the tautological explanation of law and force. Just as lightning in the natural world is a coming-into-being of electricity out of the blue, Douglass's flash is a coming-into-being of freedom in the utter darkness of outright subjection. Closely examined, however, the nothingness of un-freedom itself turns out to be mediated by the being of freedom. His sense of un-freedom ensued from his previous knowledge of freedom as a positive if abstract entity. In this sense, the pure negativity of un-freedom made appearance as the ground of freedom only because the flash illumined the contrastive relation between itself and its groundless ground.

It should be also mentioned that Douglass's gaining the first knowledge of freedom in Baltimore could not have been possible without his ceaseless and assiduous efforts to fill in the rent made in his consciousness by the voices of others that wafted to him and left him puzzled about their meanings. It is needless to say that the first and most significant of these voices was Esther's which violently pierced and yet remained inscrutable to him. Her cry arose as a forceful being from the nothingness of the morning dark and made the first potent cut in the slave boy's darkest night (or perhaps, broadest daylight) of innocence, marking the lack of knowledge itself as a positive entity differentiated from the negative ground of perfect ignorance. It opened his eyes to the truth of slavery because it was the truth of slavery, but precisely for that reason it also blinded his eyes, since it struck him with the force of the swirl (*Traumel*) of truth and left in his mind an ever-opening wound that might be called a trauma.

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standpoint of black existential philosophy (but curiously without reference to Hegel), see Boxill.

Douglass's 'sublime' encounter with the sloops on the Chesapeake Bay replicates in an external setting what took place immediately before, when he witnessed the flash of freedom in his mind. Yet, this external restaging retroactively determined the 'meaning' of the flash: freedom, reflected on the white sails on the ocean, now revealed itself as definitely not his. This is the reason why Douglass had to announce his resolve to run away in order to make freedom a real object of his firm desire once again. Not only did he need to renew his determination in his mind but also had to express the resolution by his own voice to anchor the idea of freedom as an aural object resounding in his body. He needed an externalized anchoring point, by which the idea of freedom should stop its otherwise endless sliding into the realm of fantasy.<sup>105</sup> For this purpose, he performed the act of enunciation, which was a vocal act of freedom insofar as it enacted the emergence of freedom *ex nihilo*. In this sense, it should be clear that what I pointed out earlier as the "convergence of opposites" *a propos* the act of enunciation shares an underlying logic with Hegel's "identity of being and nothing." At the same time, it must be noted that this vocal act kept Douglass permanently alienated from freedom, since it carried within itself the irreducible gap between enunciation and statement; the more energetically he pursued freedom at the level of enunciation, the more firmly the fact of his complete enslavement became entrenched at the level of statement.

After this failed act of freedom, Douglass's search for freedom led him to Sandy Jenkins's magic root. This material object was, for Douglass, a potential substitute for the abstract idea of freedom, just as a bone objectively embodies the Absolute Spirit in

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<sup>105</sup> In this formulation, I draw on Lacan's concept of the "*point de capiton*" (variously rendered as "quilting point" or "button tie" in English), by which "the signifier stops the otherwise indefinite sliding of signification" ("The Subversion of the Subject" 681).

Hegel's infinite judgment. The turn of events disposed him to consider that the root had an unaccountable force, that it was a bone of the Spirit. Ultimately, however, Douglass was unsure about this, since his encounter with the root seemed a purely external contingency, and since this object did not seem to sustain any intrinsic relation with his inner certainty of freedom. In other words, the magic root failed to occupy the place of a solid "fact" of freedom in his consciousness. Only with the victory of the battle with Covey did Douglass successfully carry out a true act of freedom which superseded all the preceding miscarried acts of becoming free, and grasp the *Sache selbst* of freedom.

The first salient element that makes Douglass's fight against Covey comparable to Hegel's dialectic of master and slave is the slave's readiness to embrace death. As we have already seen, Douglass repeatedly mentions the threat of death posed by Covey immediately before the head-on confrontation. The battle was the turning point after which death no longer appeared to him the object of sheer fear but an essential element of the game in which he staked his life on winning his freedom. In the *Narrative*, the narrator looks back on the event and weighs what he gained as a result of the victory against his own life which he might have paid for the open defiance: "[t]he gratification afforded by the triumph was a full compensation for whatever else might follow, even death itself" (65). Later, in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, the narrator more daringly declares, "I had reached the point, at which I was *not afraid to die*" (286).

In Hegel's dialectic, on the other hand, death comes into play first in what he calls the "life-and-death struggle" for recognition (114). This struggle involves two self-consciousnesses, each seeking the death of the other and daring to stake its own life (113). The reason why the two must engage in such struggle is, argues Hegel, that "they must

raise their self-certainty of *being for themselves* to truth in the ‘other’ as well as in themselves,” and that “it is only through staking one’s life that freedom is won; only thus is it proved that for self-consciousness, its essential being is not [just] being, not the *immediate* form in which it appears, not its submergence in the expanse of life” (114).<sup>106</sup> In other words, in order to prove my own freedom, I must first overcome my natural desire to preserve my life. To prove, however, is always proving not only to myself but also to the other, because the other is within me as my “essence”—because each self-consciousness is, in Hegel’s words, “outside of itself” [*außer sich*] (114). As Alexandre Kojève puts it in his seminal lectures on the *Phenomenology*, “the human *reality* is nothing but the fact of the *recognition* of one man by *another* man” (41).<sup>107</sup> I must therefore make the other recognize me as a free being, and paradoxically, this is to be accomplished only through the destruction of the other, which is nothing other than a self-destruction, the annihilation of that part of myself which sticks to the biological desire to preserve my life and thus willingly enslaves myself to natural limitations.<sup>108</sup>

What I have delineated above is the first stage of the master-slave dialectic—although, more correctly speaking, it is the preliminary stage to the dialectic, since what is at stake in this stage is not the relationship between master as such and slave as such, but, as Kojève has it, “the *possibility* of a difference between *future* Master and *future*

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<sup>106</sup> The first half of the translation was modified to incorporate Kainz’s translation in *Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit: Selections* (55). Hereafter, whenever I quote a combination of Miller’s and Kainz’s translation, the page numbers for both references will be indicated in one parenthesis.

<sup>107</sup> See also Charles Taylor’s explanation in his *Hegel*: “The subject depends on external reality. If he is to be fully at home this reality must reflect back to him what he is” (152).

<sup>108</sup> Kojève formulates this point in the following way: “Man will risk his biological *life* to satisfy his *nonbiological* Desire [*i.e.*, the desire for recognition],” in order to show himself as a “truly *human* being” (41). As we shall see later, Kojève’s rigid separation of non-biological, human desire from biological, animal needs involves its own problem.

Slave,” I call it the ‘first’ stage simply for convenience of explanation (42). This stage dissolves into the next stage by virtue of its own internal contradiction. The contradiction consists in the simplest fact that if I extinguish the life of the other, I cannot obtain the desired-for recognition from him. In the life-and-death struggle, accordingly, each self-consciousness learns that “life is as essential to it as pure self-consciousness”

(*Phenomenology* 115). From this follows the first differentiation of the two individuals into a master and a slave: “one is the independent consciousness whose essential nature is to be for itself, the other is the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another. The former is lord, the other is bondsman” (115). According to Kojève, this is the point at which individuals come into social relations and what is properly called ‘history’ emerges: “Man was born and History began with the first Fight that ended in the appearance of a Master and a Slave” (43). Hegel’s remark in his revisit to the master-slave dialectic in the *Philosophy of Mind* confirms this view: “the fight for recognition in the extreme form here indicated only occur in the *state of nature*, where men live only as *individuals*; by contrast it is absent from civil society and the political state because what constitutes the result of this combat, namely recognition, is already present there” (159).

Once the slave-master dialectic develops from the first stage (the state of nature) to the second (the social state of domination and subjugation), the two opposing self-consciousnesses no longer engage in the life-and-death struggle for recognition, even though the struggle’s two essential elements, recognition and death, continue to play a key role in an altered configuration. The master now enjoys the recognition of another consciousness without staking his life, while the bondsman is denied such satisfaction. In

other words, what prevails is a “one-sided and unequal” recognition (116). Such one-sided recognition, however, does not deserve the appellation of ‘recognition’ in the sense in which Hegel conceives it, because “authentic recognition” must be mutual; it must have the moment in which “the Master also does to himself what he is doing to the other, and the Slave does to the other what he is doing to himself” (116; Kainz 60-61). Thus what the master has so far believed evidences “the *truth* of his certainty of himself” turns out to be the diametrical opposite (116). To attain the recognition of his independence, the master paradoxically depends on the slave’s inessential consciousness. The “*truth* of the independent consciousness is accordingly the servile consciousness of the bondsman” (117). As Kojève puts it, this is the master’s “existential impasse” (46). Conversely, by occupying the place of the truth in this relationship, the slave reveals himself as a “truly independent consciousness” (*Phenomenology* 117). Thus, just like the first stage of the master-slave dialectic, the second turns out to be charged with an internal contradiction, and the contradiction induces the supersession of the current state by a different one—the third stage in which the former relationship of mastery and thralldom is completely reversed.

Not surprisingly, Hegel’s account of the slave’s overthrow of the master’s rule has drawn criticism from perceptive readers. One point that is worthy of consideration is raised by Orlando Patterson. In his comparative study of slavery, Patterson calls into question Hegel’s idea that slavery poses an existential impasse for the master. “In the first place,” argues Patterson, “the master could and usually did achieve the recognition he needed from other free persons, including other masters” (*Slavery and Social Death* 99). From the standpoint of the master, his relationship with the slave is by no means mutual

as Hegel has thought it ought to be. Therefore, the idea that the master has to seek recognition from the slave is completely pointless. What the master needs most is not so much the slave's recognition as his peers' recognition of him as sufficiently qualified to maintain his current social standing.

Patterson's point is quite relevant to Douglass since, as we have already seen, the bondsman had to remain a "slave in form" even after the battle with Covey released him from slavery "in fact" (*Narrative* 65). A glance at what took place after the fight reveals how substantially different the stake of the game is for the slave and for the overseer. Douglass gained the "fact" of his freedom insofar as Covey recognized it up to the point that the overseer "never laid the weight of his finger" on the slave during the rest of his term on Covey's farm (65). However, the recognition the slave won from the master does not directly translate into a social fact of his manumission. What was at stake for the slave breaker was less the fact of the slave's virtual freedom than the "form" of his dominance over his slave. Symptomatic of this is Covey's parting shot at Douglass when the overseer at last loosened his hold of the slave after the two-hour grapple: "if I had not resisted, he would have whipped me half so much" (64-65). In reality, as Douglass never forgets to point out, Covey could not flog the slave during the fight at all; on the contrary, "he had drawn no blood from me, but I had from him" (65). Yet, it should be noted that Covey's remark is perfectly consistent with the direction of his subsequent behavior which consists in keeping up the *appearance* of complete control over his slave. Puzzled over why Covey did not report his slave's insubordination to the authorities of Maryland which should have subjected the rebellious slave to severe public punishment for his

outright offence against the law of the slave-holding community, Douglass surmises as follows:

Covey was, probably, ashamed to have it known and confessed that he had been mastered by a boy of sixteen. Mr. Covey enjoyed the unbounded and very valuable reputation, of being a first-rate overseer and *negro breaker*. By means of this reputation, he was able to procure his hands for *very trifling* compensation, and with very great ease. His interest and his pride mutually suggested the wisdom of passing the matter by, in silence. The story that he had undertaken to whip a lad, and had been resisted, was, of itself, sufficient to damage him; for his bearing should, in the estimation of slaveholders, be of that imperial order that should make such an occurrence *impossible*. (*My Bondage* 287)

For Covey, his mastery of the slave was not an end itself as in Hegel's scenario of mutual recognition, but merely a means whereby he would gain the recognition and reputation he needed from other members of the slave-holding class. Therefore, as long as his slave remained a slave "in form," Covey was satisfied enough not to feel entrapped in an "existential impasse." At the same time, it should be pointed out that Douglass unsparingly exposes how precarious Covey's nominal rule over him was. What if a slave carries out what slaveholders never imagine can take place and thereby betrays the groundlessness of the myth of the "imperial order" on which the whole social fabric rests on? Like Hegel, Douglass believed that truth was with slaves insofar as they were endowed precisely by their social position with the power to make the "impossible" possible.

We need, then, to come back to Hegel to examine what besides mutual recognition empowers the slave to carry the master-slave dialectic to the final reversal. Hegel detects two main factors for the reversal on the part of the slave: one is the absolute fear of death and the other is work. Whereas either of the future master and the future slave equally has to stake his life to obtain the recognition he desires in the first stage, it is typically the



slave who goes through the true fear of death in the second stage. Exactly because of its absolute proximity to death, the slave's consciousness is by far more likely than the master's to experience its "own essence," which is the "truth of pure negativity":

For this consciousness has been fearful [*Angst gehabt*], not of this or that particular thing or just at odd moments, but its whole being has been seized with dread; for it has experienced the fear of death, the absolute Lord. In that experience it has been quite unmanned [*aufgelöst*], has trembled [*erzittert*] in every fibre of its being, and everything solid and stable has been shaken to its foundations. But this pure universal movement, the absolute melting-away of everything stable, is the simple essence of self-consciousness, absolute negativity, *pure being-for-self* [*Fürsichsein*], which consequently is *implicit* in this consciousness. This moment of pure being-for-self is also *explicit* for the bondsman, for in the lord it exists for him as his *object*. (117; Kainz 62)

The meaning of the above passage should be clearer if we look at Hegel's elaboration on death as "the tremendous power of the negative" in the Preface to the *Phenomenology*:

Death, if that is what we want to call this non-actuality, is of all things the most dreadful, and to hold fast what is dead requires the greatest strength. . . . the life of Spirit is not the life that shrinks from death and keeps itself untouched by devastation, but rather the life that endures it and maintains itself in it. It wins its truth only when, in utter dismemberment, it finds itself. . . . Spirit is this power only by looking the negative in the face, and tarrying with it. This tarrying with the negative is the magical power that converts it into being. (19)

It need hardly be observed that Douglass's situation immediately before his confrontation with the slave breaker was not unlike what Hegel describes as "looking the negative in the face." Covey's relentless oppression over him would regularly drive him into so intense anxiety (*Angst*) that he was "goaded almost to madness at one moment" (*Narrative* 60). In such a situation, it is no wonder that the long tarrying and trembling with consuming anxiety sets off a physical breakdown in the slave: "I was seized with a violent aching of the head, attended with extreme dizziness; I trembled in every limb," and a few seconds later, "I fell, and felt as if held down by an immense weight" (60). This is the experience of the "absolute melting-away of everything stable" [*absolute*

*Flüssigwerden alles Bestehens*], with the shock of the crumbling of everything stable and its irresistible pulling force consummately objectified in the “extreme dizziness” that he underwent and the “immense weight” which he felt drew him into the bottomless ground. It can be argued, then, that the objectification of pure negativity that happened to Douglass was in a sense more ‘absolute’ than that in Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, since the American slave not only saw the “moment of pure being-for-self” externally objectified in Covey, but also found the experience of “utter dismemberment” [*der absoluten Zerrissenheit*] immanent in every fiber of his body. To the extent that my pure negativity is projected onto the other and no more, it will remain an object outside of me and I will be permanently alienated from that object, which amounts to saying that the negative which constitutes the most essential part of myself will remain “abject,” to borrow Julia Kristeva’s useful term.<sup>109</sup> In the case of Douglass, on the other hand, his whole being trembled and even almost dissolved in his experience with the “Absolute Lord.” In this sense, it would be more correct to say that the Lord looked the slave in the face than the converse. And if there was any remainder of subjectivity in the slave, it was Douglass’s bare life fully immersed in the absolute fear of death. Yet, this does not mean that Douglass’s being simply evaporated in the presence of the Absolute Other, since, as Hegel argues, it was precisely this (almost) complete annihilation that prepared the groundless ground from which the slave emerged as a being of freedom. In this

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<sup>109</sup> Kristeva argues that “what is *abject* . . . the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses. A certain ‘ego’ that merged with its master, a superego, has flatly driven it away. It lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter’s rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master” (2). In other words, the abject is pure negativity which eludes the capture of the master’s system of desires and, as the very essence of the slave, entitles the slave to be subversive.

connection, it is worth citing Douglass's declaration in *My Bondage and My Freedom* that "I was a changed being after that fight. I was *nothing* before; I WAS A MAN NOW" (286).<sup>110</sup> This sense of his former 'nothingness' from which he arose as a changed being had its objective anchoring point in the bodily experience of tarrying with death to the point of near destruction.

Before moving on to discuss the second element in the dialectical reversal, I have to call attention to the possibility that the fear of death can rather function as an obstacle to the thorough completion of the master-slave dialectic. This is what Lacan has pointed out as "Hegel's error": "death—precisely because it is dragged into the stakes . . . — simultaneously shows what is elided by a preliminary rule as well as by the final settlement. For, in the last analysis, the loser must not perish if he is to become a slave. In other words, a pact always precedes violence before perpetuating it" ("Subversion" 685-86). Instead of opting for death, even when it is the only available pathway to freedom, the slave is likely to choose—as slaves usually did in the past—to enter into a "pact" of permanent servitude with the master simply for the purpose of preserving his life.

It should be observed here that as his ill-fated decision to seek protection from Covey in his legal master who had sent him to the slave breaker demonstrates, such a pact

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<sup>110</sup> This announcement begs the question of what Douglass meant by "man." Commenting on Douglass's similar remark that the battle with Covey revived within him "a sense of my own manhood" in the 1845 *Narrative* (65), Richard Yarborough has persuasively pointed out that nineteenth-century Afro-American spokesmen like Douglass, David Walker, and Henry Highland Garnet "saw the crucial test of black fitness to be whether or not black men were, in fact, what was conventionally considered as 'manly'" (167-68). In a similar vein, Gilroy argues that Douglass's declaration presents a "liberatory definition of masculinity" (63; see also Willet 165). In my view, although the masculinist aspect of Douglass's rhetoric is certainly important, it is not so overwhelming as to invalidate any argument about Douglass's engagement with the idea of freedom *per se*. I shall examine Gilroy's argument later in this chapter.

was a preferable option even to Douglass. What's more, even in his battle with Covey, Douglass did not exactly opt for death over servile life. If there was any choice available to him in the exigency of the moment, it was to act against the assailant, an option which he could not help choosing at the instant of his action purely regardless of its possible consequences. As the remark "from whence came the spirit I don't know" indicates (64), Douglass's act of resistance has a central void which balks the prior calculation of whether the act will bring death or life.

The earlier mentioned declaration that he was "*not afraid to die*," which he made from the vantage point of hindsight in *My Bondage and My Freedom*, must be considered in this light (286). Read within context, this statement simply means that Douglass was no longer afraid to die *as a result* of his triumph over the villainous overseer. Yet, it carries more potent signification than that since the narrator emphasizes the phrase "*not afraid to die*" in such a way that it retroactively changes the whole meaning of the foregoing event: the slave won the game *for the very reason* that he was not afraid to die. In his insightful reading of Douglass against Hegel's master-slave dialectic, Paul Gilroy comes to a conclusion more approximate to the latter position than to the former: "In Hegel's allegory . . . we see that one solipsistic combatant in the elemental struggle prefers his conqueror's version of reality to death and submits. He becomes the slave while the other achieves mastery. Douglass's version is quite different. For him, the slave actively prefers the possibility of death to the continuing condition of inhumanity on which plantation slavery depends" (63). In my view, where Gilroy sees Douglass and Hegel most divergent from each other, they come closer to each other than at other points. Just like the slave in Hegel's master-slave dialectic, Douglass experienced utter

immersion in the fear of death prior to the overcoming of his rival. If there is any difference between them as regards the function of death, it is that Hegel presupposes the slave's 'active' embracement of the Absolute Lord (the slave never shrinks from death, looks it in the face, and deliberately tarries with it . . .), thereby precluding the possibility that the slave may rather prefer the contractual relationship with his master to directly facing the threatening presence of death; and that Douglass, on the other hand, established "not afraid to die" as a truth for the slave only after the event, in which he had no other choice but to embrace the possibility of death, as it were, 'actively' (but this act was 'active' simply because of that fact that he *did* act even when the possibility of his voluntary action was nearly suspended). This is by no means to argue Douglass was in reality afraid to die. What I would like to stress is rather that at the moment of his action he didn't even know whether he was afraid to die or not. For Douglass—or at least for the Douglass before the fight—the slave's preference for death was never a decided issue. If he declared the principle of "not afraid to die" in the intense atmosphere of the 1850s that fomented a smoldering fire which would explode as the Civil War, it was part of a wholesale restructuring of the perspective on the turning point of his life in his second autobiography, in which resistance to the overseer was represented as a fully premeditated act rather than an act decided in the instant, as we have already seen.

The above argument also leads us to a related issue. Gilroy points out that "Douglass's preference for death fits readily with archival material on the practice of slave suicide" (63). In order to address this issue, we must distinguish between Douglass's suicidal act of resistance and what Gilroy calls a "liberatory definition of masculinity" (63). Douglass formulates the definition on the basis of his experience in the

physical struggle, arguing that “my long-cowed spirit was roused to an attitude of *manly* independence” (*My Bondage* 286; emphasis mine). In my view, this attitude is rather a retroactive construction erected to cover the void his own suicidal act left behind. In this connection it is worth notice that Gilroy cites a *female* slave’s suicide as paradigmatic of the practice of slave suicide. He refers to the climactic episode of William Wells Brown’s novel *Clotel* (1853), in which the eponymous heroine, a fugitive slave, leaps into the icy waters of the Potomac in order to escape the pursuit of slave catchers, thus evidencing “the unconquerable love of liberty the heart may inherit” with her own death (Gilroy 233n63; Brown 205).<sup>111</sup> This example leaves us wonder whether it can be as readily reconciled with Douglass’s position insofar as we consider a slave’s suicidal act in terms of the parameters of masculinity and femininity, as Gilroy seems to lead us to do. *Clotel*’s suicide was as firmly enmeshed in the cultural norm of womanhood as Douglass’s act of resistance was in that of manhood. If we want to see any common denominator between their actions, it must be sought in the pure negativity which functions as the ground of their acts of freedom. In other words, their acts can be equated with each other only to the extent that each act partakes of what Žižek defines as “symbolic suicide,” *i.e.*, “an act of ‘losing all,’ of withdrawing from symbolic reality, that enables us to begin anew from the ‘zero point,’ from that point of absolute freedom called by Hegel ‘abstract negativity’” (*Enjoy Your Symptom!* 49). From this perspective it can be argued that Douglass and

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<sup>111</sup> This episode is largely based on a legendary incident reported in Grace Greenwood’s poem, “The Leap from the Long Bridge. An Incident at Washington” (1851). Brown himself reprinted Greenwood’s poem almost *verbatim* without explicitly indicating his source in the chapter on *Clotel*’s suicide in the novel. In the final chapter of the novel, Brown remarks that “I had many opportunities for helping the escape of fugitives, who, in return for the assistance they received, made me the repository of their sufferings and wrongs,” and adds that he combined these fugitive slaves’ oral accounts and other reports in abolitionist journals into his story (226).

Clotel started from the same ground, but diverged in consequences, in that the former survived the act whereas the latter did not.

We have seen the first factor for the reversal, the absolute fear of death. Hegel argues that although it is a necessary condition, the fear of death by itself is not sufficient for the slave to carry out the overthrow of the order obtaining between the master and him. The feeling of absolute power is, according to Hegel, only the “dissolution *in-itself*” [*Auflösung an sich*], and in this state of fear, consciousness is “not aware that it is a *being-for-self*” yet (117-18; Kainz 63). It is only through “work” [*Arbeit*] that the slave realizes the true essence of his being (118). The master enjoys his pure desire and “unalloyed feeling of self” by indirectly relating himself with the thing via the slave’s work and consequently negating the thing; but precisely for this reason, the master’s desire is only “a fleeting one” [*Verschwinden*] and lacks “objectivity and permanence [*Bestehen*]” (118). The slave’s work, on the other hand, is “desire held in check, fleetingness staved off; in other words, work forms [*bildet*] the thing” (118; Kainz 63). This “*negative* middle term” between the master and the thing, *i.e.*, the “formative activity” [*formierende Tun*], now turns out to be “the individuality or the pure being-for-self of consciousness” (118). Through work, consciousness externalizes its pure being-for-self and passes into something that is permanent and remains. In this way, “the working consciousness comes to view that independent being as its own self” (118; Kainz 63). In other words, through formative activity, the slave consciousness becomes aware that “it itself is in-and-for-itself,” which amounts to saying that that “being-for-self belongs to him” and that “he himself exists essentially and actually in his own right” (118; Kainz 64). “Through this self-recovery,” Hegel concludes, “the slave consciousness

becomes a *mind of its own* precisely in its work, where it seemed to be merely an *alienated mind*" (118-19; Kainz 64).

Given the highly polemical character of Hegel's proposition about the revolutionary nature of the slave's work, criticisms raised against it should be worth looking at. Patterson, for instance, points out that "[i]ronically, [Hegel] is wrong precisely where most commentators, including Marx and Kojève, have considered him most insightful. There is nothing in the nature of slavery which requires that the slave be a worker. Worker qua worker has no intrinsic relation to slave qua slave" (99). If Patterson's criticism is particularly relevant to slave labor in precapitalist societies (Hegel does not explicitly indicate to what historical age his slave belongs, although, as I mentioned earlier, the first stage of the dialectic is characterized as the "state of nature"), Hegel is also liable to a charge of anachronism in that he did not fully address a burgeoning form of capitalist economy. As Fredric Jameson puts it in his commentary on the *Phenomenology*, "despite his familiarity with Adam Smith and emergent economic doctrine, Hegel's conception of work and labor—I have specifically characterized it as a handicraft ideology—betrays no anticipation of the originalities of industrial production or the factory system" (*The Hegel Variation* 68).<sup>112</sup> Even when it is taken out of the world-historical timeframe, moreover, Hegel's exaltation of slave labor is still subject to criticism. Lacan considers the slave's satisfaction in his work instantiates nothing but what Hegel himself has described as "the cunning of reason": "[t]he work, Hegel tells us, to which the slave submits in giving up jouissance out of fear of death, is precisely the path by which he achieves freedom. There can be no more obvious lure than this,

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<sup>112</sup> For an interesting discussion of Adam Smith's probable impact on Hegel's conceptualization of the master-slave dialectic, see Buck-Morss 52-53n90, 53n91.



politically or psychologically. Jouissance comes easily to the slave, and it leaves work in serfdom” (“Subversion” 686).<sup>113</sup>

Despite these criticisms, the centrality of work in the master-slave dialectic has a significant implication for my argument. It is important to note here that Hegel employs the word ‘work’ or ‘labor’ in a broader sense not completely exhausted by any kinds of handicraft ideology. In the Preface, for example, Hegel asserts that “[t]rue thoughts and scientific insight are only to be won through the labour of the concept [*der Arbeit des Begriffes*]” (43). Hegel’s notion of slave labor is predicated on this idea of conceptual labor: the slave works on and transforms his surroundings, and simultaneously through this physical activity, he conceptually works its way to the grasping of his own true essence. Kojève’s explication of the double meaning of the word *Bildung* is intended to illuminate this point: “on the one hand, it forms, transforms the World, humanizes it by making it more adapted to Man; on the other, it transforms, educates man, it humanizes him by bringing him into greater conformity with the *idea* he has of himself, an idea that . . . is only an *abstract* idea, an *ideal*” (52). It can be argued, however, that presented this way, work still remains within a handicraft ideology, part and parcel of it: the ideology idealizes work, or a certain type of productive labor—it educates man to abide in that particular kind of work and to believe that it will ‘humanize’ him—when a different mode of production is actually replacing handicraft manufacturing and

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<sup>113</sup> Hegel’s clearest formulation of the cunning of reason can be found in *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* 89. Lacan’s criticism of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic using Hegel’s own concept seems to be another token that, as Dolar puts it, “Hegel is much more Lacanian than Lacan assumes, and also that Lacan is much more Hegelian than he knows” (“Lord and Bondsman” 85).

deploying the ideology in its own service. In this way, work evidences reason's cunning complicity in the ideology rather than man's power to transform the world.

The underlying problem with Kojève's formulation of work is that it in effect obliterates the dimension of the body from formative activity. As Judith Butler explains in *Subjects of Desire*,

In Kojève's view, the sensuous aspect of human identity is precisely what calls for transcendence, what desire seeks to negate. . . . For Hegel, desire is a negating activity that both distinguishes and binds consciousness and its world, whereas for Kojève, desire is a negating activity through which consciousness is related externally, yet efficaciously, to the world. . . . Kojève deprives his position of an *embodied* understanding of desire. His subject becomes an abstract creator, the paradigm for the philosophical thinker himself; negation is less an embodied pursuit than an effort to become a pure freedom. (69-70)

This abstraction of desire from the embodied desiring subject is an operation parallel to the abstraction of productive labor from the diverse array of formative activities through cleansing of *Bildung* of its mudding in the body. In this sense, Kojève's historical agent, starting from an abstract idea, at once jumps over to another abstraction without meddling in the mediating presence of his physical body, and precisely for this reason, the agent is not truly engaging in the "labor of the concept" either. In Hegel, by contrast,

The bondsman experiences himself as an embodied actor, one who also thirsts for life. Although the bondsman confronts his freedom from natural constraints through the negating activity of his labor, he rediscovers the "natural" aspect of his existence as a *medium* of self-reflection. The body which once signified his enslavement comes to appear as the essential precondition and instrument of his freedom. (Butler 70)

Just as the dialectic of the master's and the slave's consciousnesses is irreducibly mediated by the resistant materiality of their bodies, the body engaging in formative activity is for Hegel not fully present to itself as handicraft ideology might lead us to believe. In transforming the thing into a reality that corresponds to the actor's essence,

which paradoxically does not reveal itself until the act is carried out, the body and its consciousness are caught in the disjointed temporality of the act. Hegel elaborates on this point in the section on “Reason,” which follows the section on “Self-Consciousness” (wherein appears his discussion of the master-slave struggle):

. . . action [*Handeln*] is simply the coming-to-be [*Werden*] of Spirit as *consciousness*. What the latter is *in itself*, it knows therefore from what it *actually* is [*aus seiner Wirklichkeit*]. Accordingly, an individual cannot know what he [really] is until he has made himself a reality [*Wirklichkeit*] through action [*durch das Tun*]. However, this seems to imply that he cannot determine the *End* [*Zweck*] of his action until he has carried it out; but at the same time, since he is a *conscious* individual, he must have the action in front of him beforehand as *entirely his own*, i.e. as an *End*. The individual who is going to act seems, therefore, to find himself in a circle [*Kreise*] in which each moment already presupposes the other, and thus he seems unable to find a beginning, because he only gets to know his original nature [*Wesen*], which must be his *End*, *from the deed* [*aus der Tat*], while, in order to act, he must have that *End* beforehand. But for that very reason he has to start immediately, and whatever the circumstances, without further scruples about beginning, means, or *End*, proceed to action; for his essence and *intrinsic* [*ansichseiende*] nature is beginning, means and *End*, all in one. (240).

Here Hegel is curiously close to the Kant who has spoken about a “revolution” in a man’s moral disposition, in spite of his rightful criticism of the Kantian philosophy for its preemption of cognitive means in an investigation undertaken to attain the end of knowing cognition itself and for its concomitant failure to fully address the dimension of action in cognition.<sup>114</sup> Just as Kant emphasizes the instantaneousness of the ethical transformation in which the subject springs into “a new man only by a kind of rebirth, as

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<sup>114</sup> See Hegel’s following remark in the *Encyclopaedia Logic*: “We should [says Kant] first get to know about the *instrument*, before undertaking the task that is supposed to be accomplished by means of it; for, otherwise, if the instrument is inadequate, then all further effort would have been expended in vain. . . . But the investigation of cognition cannot take place in any other way than *cognitively*; in the case of this so-called tool, the ‘investigation’ of it means nothing but the cognition of it. But to want to have cognition *before* we have any is as absurd as the wise resolve of Scholasticus to learn to *swim before he ventured into the water*” (34).

it were a new creation” (although this ‘act’ means to Kant a transformation of the mindset, and no more) (*Religion* 43), Hegel stresses that fact that the one who acts “has to start immediately,” and “without further scruples about beginning, means, or End, proceed to action.” The actor finds himself in the circular temporality of a transformative act in which he discovers his ‘original’ propensity, which should be considered as having oriented his action towards an ‘end’ from the outset. Thus the act’s time is ‘out of joint,’ not in the sense that it is an ahistorical or transhistorical moment, but that it is fully embedded in a set of given circumstances in which it takes place, and yet, this ‘given’ comes to appear as what truly concerns the actor only when the act retroactively brings to light its essential link with the most fundamental ‘given,’ the actor’s “original nature,” which is supposed to temporarily precede it and to induce it.<sup>115</sup> But a caveat is in order: we can accept Hegel’s account of how the act expresses the actor’s essence only insofar as the essence in question is freedom—there is nothing that determines what an individual really is except his or her being free. To that extent, Hegel’s point does not differ from Kant’s argument about the experience of a ‘causality of freedom,’ which consists in the realization that “man is not only much more unfree than he believes, but also much freer than he know.”<sup>116</sup>

Hegel’s stress on the aspect of bodily action in work provides another crucial link that connects Douglass’s fight against Covey to the master-slave dialectic. This aspect is the one that most of the critics who interpret Douglass’s resistance in light of Hegel tend to disregard. In his otherwise perceptive study of race in American literature, for example,

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<sup>115</sup> In Hegel’s words, “[w]hat we have . . . is a set of given *circumstances* which are *in themselves* the individual’s own original nature” (240).

<sup>116</sup> This is Zupančič’s reformulation of Kant’s thesis concerning the causality of freedom (28).

Eric Sundquist observes that “[y]et it is also necessary—Hegel notwithstanding—to move that consciousness toward *action*, toward physical *resistance*” (124). As my argument so far demonstrates, this is precisely a necessary consequence that the Hegelian dialectic entails. A more eloquent presentation of the view that exclusively focuses on the struggle for recognition and the fear of death in Hegel’s dialectic of master and slave can be found in Margaret Kohn’s argument. She maintains that “Douglass’s existential transformation—and thus the key to his sense of freedom—came *before* he fought, during the night that he spent in the woods when he felt that ‘life, in itself, has almost become burdensome’” (510; Kohn quotes from Douglass’s *My Bondage*, 278). As a result of her complete elision of the dimension of the act involved in the master-slave dialectic, she fails to fully address Douglass’s claim that the transformation took place *as a result* of the fight.

By contrast to those foregoing critics, I argue that the physical act of resistance was the most crucial factor in Douglass’s existential transformation, and that Hegel presents a strong case for its irreducible significance in the entire dialectics of master and slave. Douglass literally worked on his archenemy’s body with his own hands to attain his freedom. When he “seized Covey hard by the throat,” Douglass found the fleshy matter in his hands violently resistant. Just as the Brer Rabbit “got stuck” in the Tar-Baby in the well-known African American folktale (Harris 7), Douglass was caught by the sticky matter on which he had put his fingers and locked in the struggle, which brought him to a painful realization that the thing that he was holding had a consciousness like his. At the same time, this recognition placed the slave on an equal footing with his (deputy) master, and even on a higher ground than the master, since the slave was emboldened

enough to stake his life while the master was not. Douglass's struggle with the matter lasted for two hours, and at length he molded it into a "fact" of freedom—an unwavering certainty of freedom which involved its objective reflection in the world (*i.e.*, Covey's acquiescence in the slave's freedom). Douglass now comprehended the true essence of freedom as a result of the experience in which he squeezed blood from his enemy's flesh with his hands and firmly grasped the 'bone of the spirit' that had so far been extremely elusive for him; as in Hegel's infinite judgment, the absolute idea of freedom became present in the master's *Knochen* (bones), in which the *Knecht* (slave) discovered his essence and through this process refashioned himself. At this point, his own body which once seemed a mere obstacle to freedom—his apostrophes to the sloops on the Chesapeake arose out of the despair he felt at his body's being enchained on the hither shore even while his mind clearly saw freedom reflected on the sails in far—came to appear as the indispensable precondition of his freedom. For Douglass, the act of freedom consisted in precisely this perfect conjunction of the bodily means of freedom with freedom as the end; or to put it more correctly, only when he became aware of the abstract idea's full embodiment in the medium of its realization did he conceptually grasp the certainty of freedom as a solid 'fact.' The whole process took place in an 'out-of-joint' temporality, wherein Douglass's discovered 'essence,' that is, his 'original' propensity for freedom, in hindsight appeared to have dictated every inch of his action. Now he realized that he was far freer than he had imagined, that the only necessity that drove him to fight back against Covey was the necessity of freedom even though this necessity was inseparable from the stream of events that necessitated his action. Or rather, Douglass confirmed his capacity to be free *precisely because* he was fully conscious that

he could not have done anything other than the act of freedom—precisely because, in other words, he discovered the point where he actively embraced the necessity of freedom as essential part of his existence.

## CONCLUSION

### AFTER THE FACT OF FREEDOM

In the last chapter, I have shown that the Hegelian dialectic of master and slave is remarkably resonant with Douglass's fight with Covey not only in terms of its two vital elements, the struggle for recognition and the fear of death, but also in its emphasis on the slave's bodily work. As a result of his victory over the overseer, Douglass obtained a fact of freedom, even though he would have to remain a slave in form for a few years to come. In the conclusion, I will briefly examine the question which this characterization of the matter may raise: if the fact of freedom was absolute for Douglass, why did he need to seek further freedom even after his attainment of its fact? Why wasn't he satisfied with his being no longer a slave in fact? The answer resides in the changeability of the world in which he realized the fact of freedom. By this, I don't simply mean that Douglass was driven into a further quest for freedom by his concern that he might lose the virtual freedom for which he had gone through so much trouble if he was placed under a different overseer in the future. But I rather mean that while what Douglass attained was surely an absolute and permanent fact insofar as it actualized the concept of freedom in reality, the conjunction of the concept and reality itself was accidental. Once the moment of the fortuitous encounter passed, the fact of freedom appeared inadequate to the world, precisely because it turned into one of those appearances that had lost their necessary contact with reality. This amounts to the same thing as saying that the moment Douglass realized the concept of freedom in the world, he discovered that reality was not fully up to the fact of this realization, which as a result appeared a mere incident in subjectivity not essentially related to the objective world.



In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel has already delineated a similar consequence. He has pointed out that from the aforementioned “circle” of action in which beginning, means, and end are all in one, an individual emerges with a “work done” [*Werk*] (241).<sup>117</sup> There is, however, a “fundamental contradiction” in the accomplished work (244). Each work is “determinate or particular” [*das Bestimmte*], while the consciousness that gives itself a reality in the work is “universal” and a “quality-less void [*bestimmtheitslosen Raum*] which is left unfilled by its work” (243). To that extent, within the work itself is a “disparity between Concept and reality,” namely, between doing [*Tun*] which is the universal Concept as an “absolute transition” to reality, or as the “coming-to-be” [*Werden*] of reality, and the being of an individuality realized in the particular work (244). Because of its inherently divergent moments of doing and being, argues Hegel, the work ceases to exist as a unity precisely when it is brought into completion:

the work, *qua* the content of the whole individuality, when transferred from the *doing* of it, which is the negative unity holding captive all the moments of that content, now lets the moments go free; and in the element of existence they become indifferent to one another. Concept and reality are thus separated into purpose [*Zweck*], and that which is the original essentiality. It is accidental [*zufällig*] if the purpose has a truly essential nature, or if the in-itself is made the purpose. Even so, Concept and reality again fall apart as a *transition* to reality and as *purpose*; in other words, it is accidental if a *means* is chosen which expresses the purpose. And finally the entirety of these inner moments . . . , i.e. the *action* of the individual, is again in an accidental relationship to *reality* in general. . . . (244-45)

This is what Hegel means by the “contingency of action” [*Zufälligkeit des Tuns*] (245).

Although Hegel forthrightly proceeds to maintain that the work’s different aspects that are falling apart are united in the Concept of action, and that the latter is the “true Work”

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<sup>117</sup> Hegel does not definitively distinguish *Werk* from *Arbeit*, although the former implies the meaning of ‘work accomplished,’ while the latter is closer to the sense of ‘labor.’

[*wahre Werk*] and hence the “very heart of the matter” [*Sache selbst*] (245-46), we must stop to address the mundane yet at times momentous ramifications this sort of contingency involves, insofar as we don’t accept Hegel’s presumption of the Whole that encompasses all of the world but instead we start from the independent subsistence of the physical reality and the possibility that contingency runs far deeper in all its laws than the German philosopher was willing to admit. On the other hand, Hegel’s argument is insightful as well in that it further illuminates the convoluted temporality that characterizes the act of freedom: not only does the fact of freedom which one has obtained reveal that one has performed an act of freedom, through the act of freedom consciousness grasps its ‘true Work,’ its “substance” [*Substanz*], namely, the fact of its freedom (246).<sup>118</sup>

It is also worth noting that the course which Douglass’s quest for freedom took after the 1845 *Narrative* once again overlaps with the trajectory of the Hegelian dialectic at a remarkable point. A cursory comparison of the two different accounts of the fight with Covey presented in the *Narrative* and in *My Bondage and My Freedom* reveals a shift of Douglass’s focus. The Douglass of the first autobiography was unequivocally a heroic figure who defeated his enemy by his own single strength; no other slaves were mentioned as involved in the fight save the hired man Bill Smith, who was rallied by the overseer to his aid but simply “left Covey and myself to fight our own battle out” (64). The second autobiography, on the other hand, emphasizes the part other slaves played in the event. Bill is now revealed to be a man with positive ability to judge a situation correctly and to act shrewdly according the judgment: the black man, “who knew

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<sup>118</sup> See also Hegel’s remark in the *Philosophy of Mind*: “The substance of mind is freedom, i.e. not being dependent on an Other, the relating of itself to itself” (15).

*precisely* what Covey wished him to do, affected ignorance, and pretended he did not know what to do” (285). Moreover, *My Bondage* discloses the presence of another slave. Covey had bought the slave, named Caroline, for the mean purpose of multiplying his wealth by forcing her to bear children. Accordingly, in 1845 Douglass represented her merely as a “wretched woman” (58). In the 1855 autobiography, by contrast, Caroline is depicted as a “powerful woman,” who “could have mastered me easily, exhausted as I now was” (285). When her master ordered her to take hold of Douglass, she ignored the demand precisely as Bill had done. This was fortunate for Douglass, but she took a greater risk by her disobedience than Bill, since Covey legally owned her body and “he could do what he pleased with her”—and indeed, she would later have to endure the “dire effects of her refusal” (285). Thus, Douglass adds, “[w]e were all in open rebellion, that morning” (285). These modifications signal a notable change of Douglass’s perspective on the entire event: the victory no longer belongs solely to the heroic loner, but to all the black mutineers. As William Andrews has rightly pointed out, “[t]rue to its pervasive emphasis on the interdependence of freedom and black community, the second autobiography demonstrates that the rebel had to have black support to win his fight” (286). Whereas in 1845 Douglass located freedom primarily within his own self faced with slaveholding society (hence the focus was his resistance *against* the group of people who denied him freedom), in 1855 he sought to foreground among all else the aspect of freedom in which the destiny of Afro-American community as a whole was at stake (the stress was thence placed on his *and* other blacks’ collective campaign against the white society that withheld freedom from them).<sup>119</sup>

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<sup>119</sup> On the differences of Douglass’s two autobiographies, see also the section “The

A striking parallel to Douglass's turn to black community can be found in Hegel's thesis of the primacy of "ethical life" [*Sittlichkeit*], by which he means the moral obligations that an individual has to a community of which that individual is part. For Hegel, man cannot attain his highest moral existence save as a member of a community. Hegel illustrates man's moral obligations to his community most tellingly with the term "ethical substance" [*sittliche Substanz*]. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel uses this term to describe "the absolute spiritual *unity* of the essence of individuals in their independent *actual existence*," but it more simply refers to the community and its customs, laws, and institutions which embody man's moral duties to the community (212). In other words, the ethical substance is the objective existence of the Spirit, in which "Substance is essentially Subject," and therefore in which there is no gap between *Sollen* (ought) and *Sein* (being) (14).<sup>120</sup> Eventually, the preeminent significance of *Sittlichkeit* in Hegel's philosophical system led him to formulate the "spirit of the nation" [*Volksgeist*] which he in effect equates with the ethical substance in the 1830 *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*: "the individual exists within this substance. . . . No individual can transcend it, and although the individual may be able to distinguish between himself and others of his kind, he can make no such distinction between himself and the spirit of the nation" (52).

For anyone who is familiar with Berlin's warning against the positive notion of liberty, the danger that Hegel's position harbors should be needless to point out. While he certainly proposes the supremacy of the freedom of each person, maintaining that "[t]he

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*Narrative and My Bondage and My Freedom*" in Chapter 1 of this dissertation.

<sup>120</sup> Hegel contrasts *Sittlichkeit* to Kantian *Moralität*, which is individual morality separated from the ethical norms of society. See his remarks in, for example, *The Philosophy of Right* 123-24.

substance of the spirit is freedom” and that “[t]he end of the world spirit is realized in substance through the freedom of each individual,” Hegel ultimately turns individual freedom into a secondary matter to the “final aim” [*Endzweck*] of the state: the state is, argues Hegel, “its own end, absolute and unmoved; within the latter, freedom attains its highest right, just as this final aim has the highest right over against the individuals, whose highest duty is to be members of the state” (*World History* 55; *Philosophy of Right* 189). Hegel more clearly states his ominous conclusion as follows: “[t]he state does not exist for the sake of the citizens; it might rather be said that the state is the end, and the citizens are its instruments” (*World History* 94-95). From this perspective, it is no wonder that Hegel has been accused of his totalitarian tendency by philosophers including Berlin and Karl Popper.<sup>121</sup>

How far Douglass followed the Hegelian path from the emphasis on interdependence of individual freedom and the collective to complete subordination of the former to the latter is an open question that needs to be addressed in the future. But a few important points must be mentioned here. First, unlike Hegel, Douglass belonged to two distinct, and in some ways opposing communities, which were equally essential to what he was: the Afro-American community and the American nation, as a member of which he claimed the freedom of both himself and his fellow slaves. This double affiliation prevents him from wholeheartedly embracing either the Hegelian idealization

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<sup>121</sup> In *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, Popper presents his influential view of Hegel, according to which the German philosopher provided the “missing link” between Plato and modern totalitarianism by his doctrine that “the state is everything, and the individual nothing” (31).

of one's duties to the state or a total rejection of American democracy in favor of black militarism.<sup>122</sup>

Second, insofar as Douglass's sense of liberty is anchored so much as in his personal experience of freedom as narrated in his autobiographies rather than in the American state's customs or laws, it does not readily evaporate in the abstract generalities of the state. At the same time, while this particular experience, especially its aspect of the fear of death, gains the most trenchant significance as part of the shared experience of black people, it can also have relevance that far exceeds the bounds of a particular community. The most crucial aspect of Douglass's narrative consists in that it has a far-reaching universality *precisely because* of its irreducible particularity. It is an unparalleled story of freedom, and exactly for this reason it has attained a paradigmatic status.<sup>123</sup>

Third, Douglass's story of freedom derives its singular force from its being faithful to the starting point common to both his and Hegel's quests for freedom: the absolute absence of a secured beginning or ground. Just as philosophy, for Hegel, "lacks the advantage, which the other sciences enjoy, of being able to *presuppose* its *ob-jects*

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<sup>122</sup> As *Leslie Goldstein* has pointed out, around the late 1840's, Douglass moved "from the position of a revolutionary who opposed violence to that of a reformer who favored violence," that is, to the position that "slavery could be abolished *within* the American system through the conventional channels of political reform," even as he was "never a genuine non-resistant, properly speaking," throughout his life (62; emphasis mine).

<sup>123</sup> This paradox runs parallel to what Giorgio Agamben has described as the problem of the state of exception: since a certain point of modernity (Agamben has the Nazi State on mind but his argument is to a large extent pertinent to situations in the nineteenth century), "the voluntary creation of a permanent state of emergency . . . has become one of the essential practices of contemporary states, including so-called democratic ones" (2). This is because in modern states, "[t]he state of exception is not a special kind of law (like the law of war); rather, insofar as it is a suspension of the juridical order itself, it defines law's threshold or limit concept" (4). Freedom constitutes a vital part in this constellation, precisely because it defines the limits of law.

[*Gegenstand*] as given immediately by representation,” Douglass had to spin his narrative “without an intelligible beginning in the world” (Hegel, *Encyclopaedia Logic* 24; Douglass, *My Bondage* 157). The “antithesis and ironic reversals” that critics have noted characterize Douglass’s mode of narration demonstrate that he adhered to a dialectical approach to freedom without presupposing the object as given—and he persisted in this quest more obstinately than Hegel, who abandoned his dialectical method when he espoused the supremacy of the state at the cost of liberty (Blight, “Analyze the Sounds” 3). When revisited, even what Douglass once presented as a fact of freedom, from the perspective of which the slave was nothing other than a sheer heroic figure, reveals “something comic about it” (*My Bondage* 285). Douglass’s traversal of two different modes of narration in search of freedom—a heroic one appropriate to the story of self-realization and a comic one designed to overcome the limits of the heroic—makes him more qualified as a dialectical “myopic traveler” than Hegel himself.<sup>124</sup> It is only by fundamentally calling our conception of freedom into question and thereby liberating it from its former bounds that we can open a new horizon for the realization of our own fact of freedom in the age of liberalism in which freedom is given to each citizen but remains an abstract universality and no more.

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<sup>124</sup> I have drawn the expression from Judith Butler’s remark about “the irony of Hegel’s incessantly myopic traveler” who has “comic moment[s] of inflated self-appraisal” (76).

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